



FEATURE ARTICLE

Destroying the Hydra

What the severe weakening of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2008-2011 means for today's fight against the Islamic State

TRULS HALLBERG TØNNESSEN

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Adam Szubin

ACTING UNDER SECRETARY FOR
TERRORISM AND FINANCIAL
INTELLIGENCE, U.S. TREASURY

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FROM THE EDITOR

With speculation that a ground operation to try to liberate Mosul from the Islamic State could be launched before the end of the year, our August issue examines the challenges ahead in defeating and destroying the group in Iraq and Syria. In our cover story, Truls Tønnesen looks for

lessons learned in the severe weakening of the Islamic State of Iraq, the group's predecessor, in 2008-2011. The Islamic State's brutal attempt to dominate Sunnis remains its Achilles' heel, he argues, but it will be more difficult to shrink the Islamic State's Sunni support base this time around because of higher sectarian tension, more entrenched jihadist control, and greater brain-washing efforts. Based on a reporting trip this month to peshmerga frontlines around Mosul, Derek Flood finds grounds for pessimism that Iraqi, Kurdish, and militia forces will be able to launch an offensive on the city this fall given the distrust and discord between the various factions and the fierce resistance put up by the Islamic State in surrounding areas. In our interview, Adam Szubin, Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, provides a detailed description of U.S. and coalition efforts to go after the Islamic State's finances.

On other topics, Matthew Levitt documents Hezbollah's increasingly dangerous pivot toward confrontation with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, outlining how this has been driven by its involvement in the sectarian Syrian civil war and Iran's regional agenda. And Aymenn al-Tamimi examines the impact so far of the decoupling between al-Qa`ida and its Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, which he argues was an exercise in rebranding in order to outfox the United States and Russia and win allies on the ground in Syria—a move that appears to have paid some dividends already.

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Cover: Iraqi pro-government forces hold an Islamic State flag in Fallujah as they try to clear the city of fighters still holed up in the former jihadist bastion on June 19, 2016. (HAIDAR MOHAMMED ALI/AFP/Getty Images)

Destroying the Islamic State Hydra: Lessons Learned from the Fall of its Predecessor

By Truls Hallberg Tønnessen

The severe weakening between 2008 and 2011 of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the name al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) had given itself in 2006, provides lessons for the current campaign against its successor, the Islamic State. The key to the earlier success was the United States' ability to win the support of Sunni Arab tribes. This dynamic has proven more difficult to achieve today for a variety of reasons, including a lack of U.S. troops on the ground to temper discord and distrust between Shi`a-dominated Baghdad and the Sunnis as well as the decision not to confront Assad militarily in Syria. In addition, the Islamic State has been much more successful in monopolizing power in its core area than AQI/ISI ever was. Nevertheless, the most important reason for the eventual Sunni backlash against ISI—its brutal attempt to dominate Sunnis—is a dynamic still present in areas under Islamic State control today, providing an opportunity for the coalition to shrink the Sunni support base on which the group depends. But the radicalization of a generation by war and Islamic State brainwashing means that unless the underlying root causes of Sunni disenfranchisement are addressed and even if the Islamic State is defeated militarily in the coming months and years, the group could reemerge in new forms.

The dramatic rise of the Islamic State since 2013 has led to an intense debate over how to defeat the group. In this dialogue, however, it is not always understood that the organization has a long history and one of its earlier incarnations came close to defeat. Following its establishment in 2004, al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) rapidly increased its size and influence, especially in the Sunni-dominated Anbar Province. In August 2006, two months before AQI announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (*Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyya*), U.S. intelligence sources reported that it "was the

dominant organization of influence in Anbar."¹ Two years later, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) had lost its foothold in Anbar and experienced a dramatic reduction in its strength and activity, as documented in ISI's own statistics.^a Upbeat assessments concluded that the group had been defeated, but as the rise of the Islamic State has demonstrated, it was too optimistic to think the group had been defeated for good.² Still, the dramatic comeback of the Islamic State does not diminish the fact that the organization was weakened between 2008 and 2011 and was not able to control any territory.^b The comeback of the Islamic State does, however, raise the specter that even if the current campaign succeeds and the organization is yet again diminished, it might reappear in one form or another in a few years. This article examines the reasons for the fall of ISI and examines what lessons exist for the current offensive against the Islamic State.³

The Importance of Sunni Arab Allies

The 2007 U.S. surge during the Iraq War, when an additional 20,000 troops were deployed to the theater, has been cited as one of the most important reasons for ISI's fall.⁴ As such, the argument for increased boots on the ground has also been put forward in the discussion on how to defeat the Islamic State.⁵ Although the surge was important for the reduction of violence in Iraq, it should not be forgotten that AQI/ISI was established and became one of the most active and successful regional al-Qa`ida affiliates in the history of that organization despite the presence of over 100,000 U.S. troops, which had as one of their stated missions to fight and defeat al-Qa`ida in Iraq.^c

a From August 1-15, 2007, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) recorded 65 attacks in Anbar, while this declined to 16 attacks during the next two weeks. ISI claimed responsibility for just one attack in Anbar during September, and the trend toward a negligible number of attacks in the province continued in 2007 and 2008. At the same time, the statistics from ISI reported a marked increase in activity in Baghdad and Diyala. "The Bimonthly Results – Report No. 33," Islamic State of Iraq, posted on Shabakat Ikhlas, and accessed November 12, 2007; "The Bimonthly Results – Report No. 44," Islamic State of Iraq, posted on Muntadayat Shabakat al-Hisbah and accessed April 16, 2008. See also Nibras Kazimi, "Fascinating: The Jihadists Admit Defeat in Iraq," Talisman Gate, May 15, 2008.

b According to an intelligence estimate, ISI had lost 95 percent of its strength when the last of U.S. forces left Iraq in 2011. Bryan Price, Dan Milton, Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, and Nelly Lahoud, *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2014), p. 79.

c Between April 2003 and February 2010 the number of U.S. troops was constantly over 100,000. In February 2010 it was reduced to 96,000. See the overview of the number of U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq in Michael E. O'Hanlon and Ian Livingston, "Iraq Index- Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq," Brookings Institution, January 31, 2011, p. 13. See also Alan McLean and Archie Tse, "American Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq," *New York Times*, June 22, 2011.

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The author wishes to thank Paul Cruickshank and Brynjar Lia for their considerable editorial input on early drafts of this article.

What the early U.S. effort lacked was not additional boots on the ground but good intelligence and local allies that could help distinguish between the civilian population and the insurgents.⁶ Instead, the United States' initial blanket approach toward the Sunni Arabs only increased their unwillingness to cooperate and drove some of them into the hands of AQI, who made repeated attempts to mobilize the Sunni Arabs, to include via vows that they would avenge what they alleged were atrocities committed by U.S. troops.⁷

The key to the defeat of ISI, particularly in Anbar, was an increased willingness and ability by the United States to give protection to those local Sunni Arab tribal and insurgent leaders who rebelled against ISI because of the group's brutal coercion of the local population.⁸ The combination of the local knowledge of the tribes who turned against ISI and the additional U.S. troops proved devastating for the terrorist group. By protecting and fighting side-by-side with the Sunni Arabs, U.S. forces demonstrated a commitment that helped them gain the trust of the Sunni Arabs, at least temporarily. Additionally, by offering or promising increased Sunni Arab participation in Iraq's Security Forces, the United States also addressed one of the root causes for the conflict in Iraq. The presence of U.S. troops also dampened discord between Sunni and Shi'a factions, which exploded into view in a wave of Sunni protests and government crackdowns after their withdrawal.⁹

Given the nature of the current conflict and offensive, it might be impossible to repeat the success of the Anbar Sahwa (Awakening) because the counterinsurgency landscape is markedly different now. Sectarian tensions have grown, and the United States has no regular combat presence there. But as several analysts have argued, the ongoing offensive could have done more to get the Sunni Arabs onboard.¹⁰ Sunnis have been angered by allegations of atrocities committed by Shi'a militias, and there has been lackluster progress

in integrating Sunnis into Iraqi military structures.^{11d} Furthermore, it will continue to be difficult to motivate Syrian Sunni Arab rebels to fight against the Islamic State as long as the current coalition does not commit to fight against their primary enemy, the regime of Bashar al-Assad.¹² Moreover, both Syrian and Iraqi Sunnis who have been fighting against the Islamic State have repeatedly complained that they have not been given proper protection by the coalition from revenge attacks by the Islamic State or from Syrian, Iraqi, and Russian bombardments.¹³ Poor coordination and lack of assistance to the Syrian rebels trained by U.S. forces have also been cited as important reasons for the failure of this effort.¹⁴

Achilles' Heel

Although the landscape may be different now, the Islamic State and its predecessor organizations, AQI and ISI, have sought both to dominate Sunni populations in areas under their control and to eradicate competing actors. There is broad consensus this was one of the most important reasons that tribal and insurgent leaders rebelled initially against AQI, and it could yet lead Sunnis in Iraq and Syria to rise up against the Islamic State.¹⁵ Some have argued that this behavior is part of the "ideological DNA" of groups like AQI, ISI, and the Islamic State, and therefore they are more or less

d According to a Zogby poll released last November, only five percent of the Sunni Arabs in Iraq have confidence in the leadership of the central government in Baghdad. "Middle East 2015 – Current and Future Challenges," Zogby Research Services, November 2015.



Iraqi Sunni fighters from the Jubur tribe celebrate after defeating the Islamic State in the village of Sharween in Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad, on January 27, 2015. (AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP/Getty Images)

doomed to failure.¹⁶ Although ideology is not the only factor^e explaining this dynamic, it is possible to identify a kind of pattern in the history and life cycle of AQI/ISI/Islamic State indicating that periods of decline are, to some extent, embedded in the aggression that was key to their previous success.¹⁷

There are several examples in their history when the groups' presence was initially tolerated and even welcomed by other Sunni Arab actors so long as they did not seek to become the dominant actor and they contributed to the fight against a common enemy, be it U.S. forces in Fallujah in April 2004, the Maliki-regime in 2014, or to some extent initially the Syrian regime in 2013. These alliances between local Sunni actors and the jihadis of AQI, ISI, and the Islamic State were held together more by the actions of their enemies than by any ideological affinity.¹⁸

The same dynamics have also been partially present in the current offensive against the Islamic State, as from a Sunni Arab perspective there is some sense of *déjà vu*. An international coalition, allied with Shiite and Kurdish militias, are again pitted against a brutal and tyrannical Sunni Arab actor, recalling the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq that initially gave rise to AQI. Despite the fact that most Sunni Arabs do not have any affection for the Islamic State, they do fear negative consequences of the offensive itself and who will fill the vacuum following the eventual departure of the Islamic State. Reports that the Kurdish and Shiite militias have displaced, abused, and executed Sunni Arabs have made some Sunnis believe that the Islamic State might be the best alternative for the time being.¹⁹

As long as no credible Sunni Arab alternative exists that can promise the population some sort of safety, there will be at least a degree of passive support for the Islamic State. During the Iraq War, for example, populations living in cities recently liberated of ISI's presence were reluctant to cooperate with U.S. forces because they could not guarantee that ISI would not return and brutally retaliate against those they would accuse of cooperating with the enemy.²⁰

Time and time again, when their common enemy withdrew, ISI and the Islamic State turned against their erstwhile allies and systematically attempted to establish a monopoly of violence by targeting competing actors and those who did not submit to the group's authority. The establishment of the first Islamic State of Iraq in 2006, the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in 2013, and the declaration of the caliphate in 2014 are all illustrations of how the organization has tried to translate military victories into political victories while insisting on a dominant and authoritarian position.

Islamic State attempts to become the dominant actor have also generated Sunni Arab resistance and spurred them to turn against the group, as when Sunni Arab rebels successfully fought against the Islamic State in western Syria in January 2014. Similarly, one of the main reasons why Sunni Arab insurgents turned against AQI in 2006 was the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq, as they claimed the group attacked insurgents and other Sunni Arabs who did not acknowledge the authority of that state.²¹ As Sunni Arabs began to turn against ISI, the organization tried to force the Sunni

community to support its efforts, which only increased the Sunni Arabs' willingness to cooperate with U.S. forces. This drew ISI into a spiral of violence against the Sunni community that turned into such a vortex that in September 2007, ISI announced they would prioritize attacking Sunnis who had turned against them.²²^f

The notion that groups like AQI, ISI, and the Islamic State are doomed to failure if only left to their own devices is the basic assumption behind a containment strategy. The logic is that their internal failings are more likely to defeat the group than external military forces.²³ While the history of AQI, ISI, and the Islamic State suggests the group may sow the seeds of its own collapse, a containment strategy can only be effective and sustained if there is a political alternative to the Islamic State that meets the aspirations and security needs of Sunni Arabs.²⁴

A New Sunni Awakening in Mosul and Raqqqa?

A crucial difference between AQI/ISI and the Islamic State that makes it more challenging to convince the Sunni Arabs to break with the Islamic State, is that the latter has been able to eradicate competing actors and establish a monopoly of violence to a much greater extent. Although AQI/ISI was one of the most influential groups within the larger Sunni Arab insurgency, it had to coexist and compete with several other Sunni Arab insurgent groups. In contrast, although the Islamic State initially coexisted with other insurgent organizations, the group has been able to establish itself over time as the principal authority over much of the Sunni Arab-dominated areas of Iraq and Syria.²⁵

This dominance by the Islamic State and the lack of a vastly superior enemy (a large U.S. ground force, for example) means the Islamic State could afford to establish some degree of partnership with the local population without worrying about informants compromising their operations. Although the Islamic State, like AQI and ISI, has behaved in a highly brutal manner and ruled by force, it has also offered the local population more positive incentives than AQI/ISI ever did, and it has succeeded in establishing a more permanent presence and infrastructure as it was not confronted by a superior military force driving them to relocate constantly.²⁶

This, in combination with the fact that the Islamic State was seen as a temporarily useful ally against a common enemy, helps explain why the Islamic State was at least initially welcomed and has had more popular support than AQI/ISI.²⁷ The Islamic State's brutality against those who dare challenge its authority, and the dearth of forces that can protect those who do, makes it more difficult to replicate the success against ISI. But as with ISI, local populations' resistance against the group increased after it had consolidated control, imposed its draconian laws, and executed the disobedient.²⁸ And as the military offensive against the Islamic State has hurt it both economically and territorially, the group has had to rely more and more on force against the local population, thus increasing opposition.²⁹

The military pressure against the Islamic State and its loss of territorial control might also propel many of its supporters to turn against the group if they are convinced that the Islamic State is go-

^e There are other factors that have set up AQI/ISI/Islamic State for failure. The more they grow, for example, the more difficult it is to operate clandestinely and securely, as evidenced by the recent retrieval of a large number of Islamic State foreign fighter registration forms.

^f In its statements, the group generally placed more emphasis on legitimizing attacks against Sunni Arabs during this period than in earlier years, when the focus had been more on attacking the Shi'a, U.S. forces, and other alleged collaborators with the occupation.

ing to be the losing party. This was one of the reasons that ISI lost its foothold so rapidly.³⁰ It created a snowball effect, as explained in a journal entry by a local ISI commander in Diyala in which he described how his group of about 600 men had been reduced to less than 20 due to defection to the Sahwa or desertion.³¹ This development was strengthened by a tribal reconciliation process where former Iraqi AQI/ISI members were reintegrated into their tribes.³² Likewise, as the Islamic State has been pushed back and hurt economically, there have been growing reports of both foreign and local fighters who have defected or want to defect from the Islamic State.³³ The Islamic State is also not as cohesive and unified an organization as it portrays itself in its propaganda, and there have been increasing reports of tensions between different constituencies within the group.³⁴

All this indicates that there now exists an opportunity to convince Sunni Arabs supporting or living under the rule of the Islamic State to turn against it, so long as military measures are combined with political efforts to integrate Sunnis. Most surveys of Sunni Arab support for AQI/ISI/the Islamic State have found that they support the group due to insecurity, fear, and long-standing grievances.³⁵ The Islamic State could be undermined by providing the less ideologically motivated rank-and-file members and supporters with some sort of exit strategy.³⁶ One reason the Sahwa phenomenon was successful is that it provided the insurgents with an 'honorable' exit strategy, helping them participate in a political process that had previously been denied to them.

In places such as Raqqa and Mosul, one source of Sunni recalcitrance in breaking with the Islamic State is fear and loathing of Shi'a and Kurdish forces, fueled by allegations that these actors are attempting to redraw territorial boundaries and lay waste to Sunni areas under the pretext of fighting the Islamic State.³⁷ These fears have only been compounded by the Islamic State's relentless propaganda drive to demonize its enemies in the areas under its control.

As this analysis has made clear, in order to win hearts and minds, it will be important to increase the protection of Sunni Arab civilians in territories that recently have been liberated from the Islamic State. Many inhabitants of areas controlled by the Islamic State do not believe the coalition will provide them with protection from their liberators, be they Kurdish or Shiite militants, or Iraqi or Syrian governmental forces, whom they believe will punish anyone thought to have cooperated with the Islamic State.³⁸ Much greater integration of Sunnis into the Iraqi military and more involvement of Sunni tribal fighters in clear-and-hold operations would make a big difference.³⁹ An increase in reconstruction funds for the liberated towns in ruins would also help win Sunni hearts and minds.⁴⁰ There are indications that the rebuilding process has been far too slow and that the focus on the military campaign comes at the expense of planning for the political and stabilization phase.⁴¹ One concrete measure that would help improve the situation for the local population and help restore some order and normalcy would be to assist Iraq in clearing its large number of landmines.⁴²

"The Islamic State is not as cohesive and unified as it portrays itself in its propaganda, and there have been increasing reports of tensions between different constituencies within the group."

Addressing Root Causes

Despite the fact that both AQI/ISI and the Islamic State have skillfully and ruthlessly exploited conflicts, it is important to note that they are primarily a consequence and not a cause of these conflicts. This also means that they are, to some extent, dependent on the existence of conflict in order to thrive. This is illustrated by the rise and fall of AQI/ISI. The group flourished when the security situation deteriorated, aided in part by their own campaign of suicide attacks, and conversely when the Sunni Arabs' feeling of security improved, AQI/ISI found it much more difficult to thrive.⁴³ It is no coincidence that the organization was at its weakest during the relative optimism in Iraq between 2008 and 2010. Likewise, the primary reason for the dramatic rise of the Islamic State is the Syrian civil war and also Iraq's escalating political conflict following the withdrawal of U.S. forces in December 2011. These events have resulted in the fragmentation of authority in the contiguous Sunni Arab-dominated areas of Iraq and Syria, the traditional core areas of the Islamic State and AQI/ISI.⁴⁴

But the rise of the Islamic State is also a product of the long-term, devastating impact of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq on civilians. A 2008 report found that as many as 47 percent of the households in Anbar Province had experienced a member killed between 2006 and 2008 and that a large share of children in the province grew up without their fathers.⁴⁵ Iraq has also been ranked one of the most corrupt countries in the world for several consecutive years, and there has been a long-standing, cross-sectarian distrust of the Iraqi government.⁴⁶ Twenty percent of the population in Iraq is between 15 and 24 years and thus were between two and 11 years old at the time of the 2003 invasion. This generation has been formed by the harrowing experience of growing up during a violent and sectarian conflict, where fear, insecurity, and mutual sectarian distrust was prevalent.⁴⁷ Especially for Sunni Arab youth, the future looks bleak with dim prospects for a career or political influence and a deeply ingrained distrust of the Shi'a-dominated central government that brutally cracked down on Sunni Arabs who protested against the government.⁴⁸ The Islamic State has recruited effectively among this disempowered generation and especially among the growing prison population.⁴⁹ In addition, in strongholds like Raqqa and Mosul, the Islamic State has sought to impose a new socio-political order that has been particularly observable in its attempt to train the younger generation to be ideal citizens of a utopian state.⁵⁰

^g It should be noted that there are at least some positive indications of increased participation of Sunni Arabs in the offensive against the Islamic State. Mark Perry, "Get Ready for Obama's 'October Surprise' in Iraq," *Politico*, August 1, 2016.

^h This is illustrated by the "Where Things Stand" (WTS) series, consisting of six polls conducted in Iraq from 2004 to 2009. For more on this series, see "Afghanistan and Iraq Polls: Where Things Stand," ABC News, January 11, 2010.

If these deep currents that have propelled AQI, ISI, and the Islamic State are not properly addressed, the group might reappear in a different incarnation even if it is defeated. It might be unrealistic to expect the coalition to fix all of the root causes.⁴⁹ But for humanitarian reasons and the prevention of an Islamic State comeback, significant attention should be paid to the effects that the ongoing conflicts have had on the local populace.ⁱ

The Future Threat

The Islamic State has demonstrated its ability to regenerate and change shape. A consistent feature of AQI/ISI and the Islamic State is their switching between being a terrorist group without territorial control and an insurgent group with territorial control. When the organization has been weak or weakened, it has moved underground and resorted to its signature terrorist and suicide attacks, but as its strength (and hubris) has increased, it has operated out in the open and even engaged in conventional warfare, defending its territorial claims.

It has been rightly pointed out that territorial control is perhaps the most important source of legitimacy for the Islamic State, particularly for its claims of statehood.⁵⁰ However, one of the main strengths of its predecessor, AQI/ISI, which made it such a formidable foe, was its mobility. The U.S. fight against AQI/ISI was therefore sometimes likened to a game of whack-a-mole or the squeezing of a balloon, where military pressure against AQI/ISI in one area only pushed it into another.⁵¹ One of the primary strengths

of the Islamic State is its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and there are already indications it is compensating for its loss of territorial control with an increased campaign of terrorism, both locally and internationally.⁵² If the Islamic State loses control of urban centers like Raqqa and Mosul, it will likely hide in the deserts or go underground among the urban population and plan a terror campaign that could well lead to yet another comeback. This makes it imperative to establish a good relationship with the Sunni Arabs in order to improve intelligence on the whereabouts of the remnants of the group.⁵³

One thing seems inevitable regardless of the degree of political reconciliation that materializes in Syria and Iraq. Just as the fall of the Taliban sanctuary in Afghanistan led to the establishment of new affiliates of al-Qa`ida, the fall of ISI led several of its foreign fighters to relocate and join or establish other jihadist groups in the Middle East.^j Given the unprecedentedly high number of foreign fighters in the ranks of the Islamic State and the geographical spread of the group throughout the region, the odds that some of these foreign fighters will relocate and engage in international terrorism or join jihadist groups outside of Iraq and Syria are fairly high.

The conclusion Brian Fishman made about ISI back in 2011 will most likely hold true for several years to come, even if the Islamic State loses most or all of its territory: "Viewed as an insurgent organization, the ISI has been defeated. Viewed as a transnational terrorist group, it is vibrant."⁵⁴ **CTC**

i The importance of addressing these root causes in order to avoid a new incarnation of the Islamic State is illustrated in a recent study of why young Syrians join extremist group, which cited lack of economic opportunity, experiences of violence and trauma, and degradation of education infrastructure as the primary drivers. "Why young Syrians choose to fight – Vulnerability and Resilience to Recruitment by Violent Extremist Groups in Syria," International Alert, 2016.

j Studies of the Lebanese Fatah al-Islam have, for instance, found that former AQI members and other veterans who had left Iraq in disappointment were central in establishing the group. See Tine Gade, *Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Between Global and Local Jihad* (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2007) and Nir Rosen, "Al-Qaeda in Lebanon," *Boston Review*, January–February 2008.

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Adam Szubin, Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, U.S. Dept. of Treasury

By Paul Cruickshank and Nicole Magney

Adam J. Szubin is the Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence at the United States Department of the Treasury. He leads the policy, enforcement, regulatory, and intelligence functions of the Treasury Department aimed at identifying and disrupting the lines of financial support to international terrorist organizations and other actors posing a threat to U.S. national security. He served as the Director of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) from 2006-2015 and earlier as the Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence.

CTC: What capabilities does the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI) bring to bear on countering terrorism finances?

Szubin: We were built to combat terror financing, and we bring quite a lot to that effort. We provide everything from expert financial intelligence and analysis, to some of the more structural steps that are helping our partners around the world harden their financial systems against terror finance. And that can be quite beyond banks; it can affect money exchangers, trading houses, front companies, and charities. It includes certainly our targeted sanctions and enforcement efforts to name, expose, and disrupt the activities of individual companies, front companies, real companies, individuals who are financing terrorism, who are the donors, the fundraisers, the middlemen, the facilitators, the attorneys, and/or the accountants employed by terror groups. A big part of our activity is sharing information and intelligence with other governments to assist them in cracking down on foreign-based individuals. We're bringing all of that to bear on ISIL as a threat.

CTC: How are you evolving as an organization to meet that new threat?

Szubin: We are growing our organization while understanding that we'll never be able to handle every piece of intelligence that comes in and every threat. There's always a lot of triage. We've had to evolve in our thinking because the model that ISIL is using as a financial model is different from other terrorist organizations. I don't know that I'd use the word unique because we've confronted other terror groups who hold territory before—think of al-Shabaab, think of the FARC, at times think of Hamas. But none of them have done so on the scale of ISIL, and none of them pose the same active threat. And so that has forced us to adapt our thinking both in terms of intelligence gathering and in terms of our operational work to adjust to this model.

CTC: How is the United States and its coalition partners targeting the finances of the Islamic State?

Szubin: In terms of the campaign on the financial side, we tend to group it into two major baskets—the first being targeting their

revenue stream, their sources of income, and the second being targeting their ability to harness and use that money. The first has been largely, though not entirely, a military effort.

ISIL is overwhelmingly financed internally, mainly from sales of oil and gas, and taxation/extortion. Those types of internal revenue streams are, of course, very difficult to target in the same way you could with, for example, foreign donations or Islamic charities that are being corrupted by a terror group like al-Qa`ida. It's far harder to target those revenue streams using treasury regulatory and enforcement tools. And as a result, the military efforts of the coalition have been having the greatest impact by far. And that includes targeting oil and gas fields, the infrastructure both upstream and downstream, all the way down to tanker trucks. Looking at the other vulnerabilities in their financial infrastructure, the military has had some real successes in the tens of millions of dollars, if not considerably higher, by blowing up cash storehouses. And then you combine that with the targeted efforts against ISIL leadership, and across the board, that has a great impact on ISIL's ability to generate money.

On top of that you have ISIL's ability to then spend its money, and this is the point that I think is not well understood. People picture ISIL as entirely self-reliant, and certainly they're well-stocked with small arms, but there are plenty of items (satellite phones, weaponry, replacement parts for their oil and gas sector) that they need to obtain from the outside. And to do that they need to be able to take money they're generating in cash within Iraq and Syria and get it into the formal financial system. And that's where I think Treasury's tools can be pretty effective.

CTC: How are you working to shut the Islamic State off from the international financial system?

Szubin: There's work we're doing, both on our own, but also alongside a long list of allies primarily coordinated through something called the Counter ISIL Finance Group, or the CIFG, where Italy, Saudi Arabia, and the United States are the three co-chairs, and there are close to 40 countries participating. We're using CIFG, as well as our existing multilateral and bilateral relationships, to share targeted intelligence on exchange houses and money changers and to increase our ability to apprehend ISIL cash couriers when they're crossing borders. We're doing a lot of work with the regional states to share intelligence and best practices. Our actions targeting exchange houses is an example of this. In conjunction with Iraqi authorities we've been identifying Iraqi exchange houses in ISIL-held territory or working with ISIL, in an effort to close them out of cash auctions in Iraq. We've been then taking that same list to the Jordanians, Lebanese, and Turks and ensuring that they're closed out of the financial systems there.

CTC: How helpful was the adoption of U.N. Resolution 2253?^a

Szubin: It was very symbolically important to demonstrate the international resolve with respect to ISIL, that it's a group that's being treated on par with al-Qa`ida under a global mandatory financial asset ban. The whole U.N.-al-Qa`ida-Taliban apparatus, in terms of countries needing to report to the U.N. what they're doing to implement it, has proven to be a powerful framework. To bring that to bear against ISIL is a powerful thing in my view. I'd also point you to the importance of a Security Council meeting that my boss, Secretary [Jacob] Lew, chaired in December. It was the first of its kind to feature finance ministers from the 15 Security Council members sitting around the table instead of ambassadors or foreign ministers. There was not any daylight as you went around the room; the entire world is united in this. So while there are a lot of challenges when you're talking about the counter-ISIL financing campaign, one of our huge advantages is the international consensus.

CTC: While measuring progress can never be an exact science, do you have metrics and benchmarks on Islamic State revenue streams and the degradation of their finances?

Szubin: You're asking a question that I find myself asking very often. Obviously, it's key in this effort to know how well we're doing and what's making a difference and what isn't. It's proven to be a pretty hard intelligence question to be able to measure ISIL's overall accounting. Of course, they go to great lengths to keep that hidden. And when we get a snapshot, it's either from something like the Abu Sayyaf raid^b where you're all of the sudden privy to a tremendous amount of information, but it's a snapshot in time. Or it's a more impressionistic data point about what's happening in Mosul or Raqqa. I can share with you a number of those data points that we find valuable, but I will admit they are not nearly as quantitative as we would like. And they don't present us with the ability to compare how they are doing year on year.

Overall, ISIL is significantly constrained in terms of its funding. A reflection of that is the famous memo that surfaced with respect to the fighters getting a 50-percent pay cut in their salaries in Raqqa.^c The text, as I recall, stated that all ISIL employees and fighters will be receiving a 50-percent pay cut. There will be no exemptions. They went out of their way to emphasize that point, which I think cries out for some reading between the lines. I have no doubt that ISIL continues to pay its chemical engineers and the people who are advanced on the weapons side, people who are helping it on the gas refinery side, the same salaries they used to pay them. The 50-percent pay cut is probably for the foreign fighters or



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those who are in the second or third ring, and it's a pretty significant pay cut.

It's also, I believe, a vulnerability for the organization because they have been able to attract unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters to come join their cause based on two things. One was battlefield success and this narrative that they were moving towards establishing a caliphate. They no longer have that. The last six months have been nothing but loss of territory followed by loss of territory. And secondly, they were paying better than the going rate, more, for example, than a civil servant could be expected to receive in a place like Iraq and more than other militia groups were paying. So a 50-percent pay cut is jeopardizing that second attraction.

Obviously, there will continue to be sort of true-blue ISIL adherents, but that represents, in my understanding, a small fraction of the people we're talking about as fighters for the ISIL cause.

In addition to the memo, we received information earlier this year indicating that ISIL stopped paying death benefits to families of ISIL personnel. That's a core benefit that a group like ISIL needs to promise to the families of those going on suicide or likely suicide missions in order to maintain their operational tempo.

Another data point is we've seen them significantly increase taxation rates and increase the categories of activity they're now taxing. While they had once held off from taxing the poorest civilians on humanitarian grounds, they are now taxing across the board. Where the rates might have once been three or five percent, we see those doubling, and we see them going after everything from income to remittances to picking up pension payments. Every aspect of life is being taxed, including real estate. What happens alongside that is increasing disaffection, increasing frustration, and all of the tensions that come with that for a group that's trying to hold territory, sell itself as a quasi-governing authority, while fighting a multi-front war.

CTC: And there has also been evidence the Islamic State is increasingly using fines for various offenses as punishments.

Szubin: Yes. And while ISIL can call it a fine, these fines, taxes, and

a U.N. Security Council Resolution 2253, which was adopted in December 2015, extended the U.N. al-Qa`ida and Taliban sanctions regime to include the Islamic State.

b According to U.S. officials, the May 2015 raid in eastern Syria on the residence of Abu Sayyaf, described as the chief financial officer of the Islamic State, yielded significant information. See Eric Schmitt, "A Raid on ISIS Yields a Trove of Intelligence," *New York Times*, June 8, 2015.

c A directive apparently issued by Wilayat Raqqa in November/December 2015 made the announcement: "So on account of the exceptional circumstances the Islamic State is facing, it has been decided to reduce the salaries that are paid to all mujahideen by half, and it is not allowed for anyone to be exempted from this decision, whatever his position." See Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (cont.): Specimen 12Q" and al-Tamimi, "A Caliphate under Strain: The Documentary Evidence," *CTC Sentinel* 9:4 (2016).

extortions all feel the same to the person who's giving the money who really can't afford it.

CTC: We're not at the stage yet where this is a group on the brink of financial collapse, correct?

Szubin: I wouldn't describe it that way, but I do think they're feeling financial strain across the board. If you look at a number of the military fronts, they're feeling strain there. I think they're feeling it in terms of the public narrative. And they're feeling strain in terms of the internal support by Sunni populations who have soured even further on ISIL. They are back on their heels, but we need to keep at it and even intensify our work.

CTC: We've seen dollar estimates from some intelligence groups in the private sector on the decline in the Islamic State's monthly revenue streams.^d Does the U.S. government try to quantify things in similar ways? Or is it impossible given the fragmentary intelligence picture to reliably provide such precise metrics?

Szubin: We have insights on certain things like how many oil wells we've taken out and we have estimates of what proportion of the production those oil wells accounted for, but this is not a static picture. Of course, ISIL is then turning to other oil wells. They've proven very adaptive. So it has proven very difficult to quantify, let's say, monthly figures. There are estimates by outside groups on revenue streams, but I don't have the confidence to be able to cite any of those for you.

CTC: Juan Zarate, the former U.S. deputy national security advisor for combating terrorism and a CTC senior fellow, told *CTC Sentinel* in April that one limitation on the coalition's ability to target the Islamic State's finances is that the group has created "economic defensive shields" in occupying urban areas and knows the coalition is "not going to bomb all the banks in Mosul or starve the economy of millions of people."^e How have humanitarian concerns factored into coalition efforts to go after Islamic State financing?

Szubin: Humanitarian imperatives cut both ways. The military is grappling with this daily in a very nuanced way in terms of strikes. That includes strikes against financial targets. You saw with the strikes on tanker trucks. The military didn't just blow them up. Our assessment was that the drivers of the oil tanker trucks were just ordinary Syrian civilians and not ISIL fighters. So those would have been civilian casualties. The coalition instead airdropped pamphlets by the queue of the tanker trucks saying, "We're going to blow these up in about 15 minutes." People scattered, they blew them all up, and there were zero civilian casualties. And that's an example of great sensitivity to humanitarian concerns without sacrificing the efficacy of the strike. But that gets into the kinetic side. Where you're talking more strictly about financial, regulatory, and sanctions measures, I think we just have to go all out. We want to put the greatest dent possible in their revenue stream. The more financial pressure we can exert, the sooner we can liberate the civilian pop-

ulation areas from ISIL.

CTC: To what degree is intelligence improving on the Islamic State's finances? To what degree have U.S. Special Forces raids on Islamic State operatives, for example the raid on the compound of the Islamic State operative Abu Sayyaf, and the recovery of data such as recently in Manbij, Syria,^e contributed toward our understanding of Islamic State financial networks?

Szubin: We have some of the best and brightest minds on this, and collection, including the additional capture of information that you're referring to, is being exploited really thoroughly. This is not a typical counterterrorism target where we're operating in the territory in which the group is operating. This is a group that is controlling territory where it's extremely hard for us to operate. They're largely cash-based within that territory, and so we don't have the normal financial transaction information that could yield data. I don't want to pretend it's not a difficult intelligence target, but I do feel like we're learning more and more as we go.

CTC: What information that you have collected stands out as particularly important?

Szubin: One of the interesting things that I've seen coming out in the last six to nine months, especially since Operation Tidal Wave II^f began to have more and more of an impact on the group's revenues, is information about corruption—corruption investigations within ISIL. We've seen allegations to the tune of millions of dollars being embezzled by ISIL leaders as their resources have shrunk. That's another indicator of success, in my mind. This information allows us to draw attention to the fact that a group peddling itself to foreign recruits as a pure expression of the Islamic caliphate is stooping to stealing from its own people. Even putting aside the murderous nature of the group and the fact that they're corrupting the principles they claim to stand for, they're lying to potential recruits on simple things such as quality of life, the salary they'll be paid, or the benefits that will be provided to their families.

CTC: Why has it proven so hard for the coalition to go after criminal middlemen facilitating oil and other smuggling in and out of Islamic State territory?

Szubin: Smuggling networks have been key to their ability to get material in and out of their territory. If you're talking about those who might be black-market oil profiteers or smugglers who are moving goods across the border into Jordan or Turkey, then you're talking about smuggling routes that have existed for centuries, in many cases millennia. It is not a simple thing to simply crack down on that border. For the coalition, of course, these middlemen are civilians, and they are not going to be who the military is looking for in terms of striking against ISIL. This is more about a law enforcement and border patrol issue—and that is never an easy thing to do—but it's especially hard in that part of the world. And although smuggling is a concern, it is important to note that the majority of

e According to U.S. officials, a significant amount of data has been recovered from the northern Syrian town of Manbij this summer. See Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Secures Vast New Trove of Intelligence on ISIS," *New York Times*, July 27, 2016.

f Operation Tidal Wave II is the name of the coalition air campaign initiated in the fall of 2015 to strike Islamic State oil and gas sector, including infrastructure, refineries, transport, and collection points.

d For example, IHS reported that overall Islamic State monthly revenue had declined to \$56m for March 2016 from around \$80m in mid-2015. See "Islamic State Monthly Revenue Drops to \$56 million, IHS Says," IHS Press Release, April 18, 2016.

oil produced in ISIL-held areas is consumed internally. In addition, ISIL sells some natural gas to the Assad regime in Syria.

CTC: The November Paris attacks, according to some initial estimates, cost as little as \$10,000 to execute.² To what degree does the Islamic State have the financial capacity to create the machinery to launch attacks of significantly greater scale and complexity?

Szubin: That's a hard question to answer. Of course, the external plots that you've noted and CIA Director John Brennan recently noted^g are comparatively inexpensive to finance if you're just looking at the cost of the actual attack. What I think is often missed is there's a far more expensive infrastructure and support network that typically exists behind that, especially if you're talking about a more sophisticated attack where you have individuals in training camps who are obtaining fraudulent documents and paying bribes. That type of preparation can go on for years, if not longer, and it is not inexpensive to finance. But the actual day-of attack cost is low. It's difficult, therefore, to dry up the financing to a point where the money isn't there to sponsor it. What we do set as our goal is to weaken the group's overall financing enough that we're accelerating their demise as an organization or at least force their transformation into a far smaller, less effective, less dangerous group. That's where I think the financial campaign has been making a difference and can deliver results.

CTC: Would you agree that so far the Islamic State has not put a large fraction of their financial resources into international attack planning?

Szubin: I think that's fair to say. You're pointing to something that has been discussed quite a bit in recent weeks, which is as ISIL is losing territory, does it transform to more of an al-Qa`ida core-style group where it is basically a senior leadership in hiding and it's deploying cells for external attack and/or relying on ISIL-inspired actors, such as lone wolves, to carry out its attacks. There's no doubt that that's a far less expensive model than trying to govern population centers like Mosul, keeping the water and electricity on, paying salaries, and so on. So in that sense, sure, it is far less expensive, but

^g CIA Director John Brennan testified in June that "unfortunately, despite all of our progress against ISIL on the battlefield and in the financial realm, our efforts have not reduced the group's terrorism capability and global reach. The resources needed for terrorism are very modest, and the group would have to suffer even heavier losses on territory, manpower and money for its terrorist capacity to decline significantly." Statement by Central Intelligence Agency Director John O. Brennan before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, June 16, 2016.

it's also I think a far less compelling narrative than the one ISIL was able to disseminate a year and a half ago when they were on the ascendancy. So I don't see an ISIL in that form attracting anywhere near the level of support and foreign fighters that they have historically, and that will weaken them as a group.

CTC: Changing gears, what is the level of concern on the flow of funds from private donors in the Gulf to militant groups in Syria, including Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham?

Szubin: That has been a focus for my office and for our colleagues across the U.S. government, and it is something that we devote quite a bit of time to—how to tighten the regime, the counter-financing of terrorism regime across the Gulf States with respect to some of these groups. And that affects wealthy donors and/or charities that are either being abused or are intentionally directing funds to some of these groups. Regardless, if we see funding that's going to an al-Qa`ida affiliate or an al-Qa`ida-aligned group, that's something that obviously we take very seriously.

CTC: How big are these financial flows?

Szubin: Again, it's difficult to give precise estimates. We're talking about significant amounts of money. The overall annual budget of some of these groups is in the tens of millions of dollars.

CTC: What has been the progress in going after the finances of the global al-Qa`ida network? What is the concern about money coming into al-Qa`ida-aligned groups in Syria from private donors in the Gulf, including via online crowdfunding? Will Jabhat al-Nusra's announcement of decoupling from al-Qa`ida make it more difficult to stem funds being sent to them?

Szubin: We continue to aggressively go after al-Qa`ida core financing and that of al-Qa`ida's external affiliates. With regard to the recent activity that we see with Nusra in purporting to distance itself from al-Qa`ida, we obviously believe that move to be transparently misleading. This purported split will not change our approach to combating the group's financial and logistical support networks. While we recognize there is still more work to be done, we continue to make progress on combating al-Qa`ida's and Nusra's finances. In May, we sanctioned three al-Nusra Front financial facilitators: 'Abdallah Hadi 'Abd al-Rahman Fayhan Sharban al-Anizii, Abd al-Muhsin Zabin Mutib Naif al-Mutayri, and Mostafa Mahamed. In Yemen, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) continues to exploit the unstable situation to gain funding for their organization. We continue to use targeted measures to disrupt the group's revenue sources, and in May we sanctioned two AQAP financial facilitators: Nayif Salih Salim al-Qaysi and Ghalib Abdullah al-Zaidi. **CTC**

Citations

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Hezbollah's Pivot Toward the Gulf

By Matthew Levitt

Both for internal reasons and as a product of its close alliance with Iran, Hezbollah has taken a sharp pivot toward confrontation with the Gulf States. For Hezbollah, this pivot is not exclusive of its open-ended battle with Israel but rather an extension of it and of its fight against Sunni rebels in Syria. What started as a battle of words is now threatening to become far more dangerous.

Hezbollah's status in the wider Sunni Arab world has dropped precipitously since its height a decade ago after the 2006 Lebanon War. In the wake of that conflict, Hezbollah rode a wave of popular support across the region. A decade later, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has labeled Hezbollah a terrorist group and the Gulf States have cracked down on Hezbollah supporters and financiers within their borders.¹ The Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have issued statements condemning Hezbollah as well,² leading to a war of words between the group and Gulf officials. In January 2016, the Saudi government released a report on Iranian-sponsored terrorism that focused heavily on Hezbollah, spanning the group's militant activities from the 1980s to the present.³

But increasingly tense relations—and the larger regional context of a proxy war between Iran, Hezbollah's patron and sponsor, and the Gulf States led by Saudi Arabia—may now be moving this schism from words to actions, threatening more overt violence between Hezbollah and its Shi'a allies and the Gulf States and their Sunni partners. In July, Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal spoke at a conference about the exiled Iranian rebel group Mujahideen-e-Khalq. Days later, a senior Iranian official claimed to have intelligence linking the Saudis to terrorist plots targeting Iran and warned, "Our message to Saudis from today is if we get angry, we will leave no trace of Saudis on Earth."⁴ Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah has been equally acerbic toward the Saudis, charging Riyadh with promoting extremism and sectarianism in the region. "Al Saud wants Sunni-Shiite strife," Nasrallah said in January after the execution of Saudi Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr. "They are the ones who ignited it before and are doing so in every part of

the world."⁵

Much has changed since the 2006 Lebanon War when the group inflicted heavy losses on Israeli forces and declared "divine victory" as the first Arab army not to be fully defeated in a war with Israel. Egyptian newspapers ran special supplements and carried full page pictures of Nasrallah with titles like "Nasrallah: In Nasser's Footsteps" and "Nasser 1956—Nasrallah 2006: We will fight and not surrender."⁶ Nasrallah himself appeared on Al Jazeera and, in a clip that aired several times, confidently portrayed Hezbollah as acting in the interests of all Muslims—"A defeat for us is a defeat for the whole Muslim nation."⁷ On the Arab street, Nasrallah and his warriors were heroes of the Arab world.⁸

Ten years after the 2006 war, perceptions of Hezbollah in the eyes of the Arab Sunni world have deteriorated. After the terrorist group designation by the GCC, Nasrallah insisted that most of the Arab world rejected the label and still supported the group.⁹ But polling data from September 2015 paints a different picture, with 86 percent of Jordanians holding a negative view of Hezbollah and the group earning just 13- to 15-percent approval ratings in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹⁰

Hezbollah has long been active in the Gulf, and there is therefore a history of tension between the group and the Sunni Gulf States. But Hezbollah's activist posture in the region today, in places like Iraq and Yemen but in Syria in particular, has put the group in a position of more direct confrontation with the Gulf States than has been the case for a long time.

Background: History of Hezbollah in the Gulf

Hezbollah has a long history of activity beyond Lebanon's borders, with a particular emphasis on operations in the Gulf. In 1983 Hezbollah and Iraqi Dawa operatives carried out a series of bombings targeting Kuwaiti, American, and French interests in Kuwait, killing six people and wounding nearly 90.¹¹ Over the next few years Hezbollah operatives would be arrested in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.¹² In the late 1980s, Saudi Hezbollah (aka Hezbollah al Hejaz) carried out a variety of attacks, from bombing petro-chemical facilities to assassinating Saudi diplomats around the world.¹³

Hezbollah operatives remained active in the region, and in 1990 a CIA analysis explicitly tied their activities to Iran, assessing that Iranian-linked terrorist attacks carried out over the previous year "were probably approved in advance" by the president and other senior leaders.¹⁴ In this context, Hezbollah is best known, however, for sending operatives to help local Saudis affiliated with Saudi Hezbollah carry out the June 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers. The largest non-nuclear explosion then on record, the attack killed 19 servicemen and several Saudi citizens in a nearby park; 372 Americans were injured as well.¹⁵

Hezbollah's Regional Posture

The impact of the Syrian war on Hezbollah has been nothing short

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of dramatic, shifting the group's focus from battling Israel and contesting the political space within Lebanon to engaging in regional conflicts beyond the borders of Lebanon. Hezbollah deployed a unit to Iraq to train Shi'a militants during the Iraq war, where it worked in close cooperation with Iran, but its deep commitment on the ground in the war in Syria underscores the group's new, regional, pan-Shi'a focus. With the notable exception of Syria, Hezbollah's regional reorientation is most obvious in its increased operational tempo in the Gulf.

In Yemen, a small number of Hezbollah operatives have been training Houthi rebels for some time, but in early 2016 the Gulf-backed Yemeni government claimed to have physical evidence of "Hezbollah training the Houthi rebels and fighting alongside them in attacks on Saudi Arabia's border."¹⁶ Three years earlier, the U.S. government revealed that Khalil Harb, a former special operations commander and a close adviser to Nasrallah, was overseeing Hezbollah's activities in Yemen. He has also traveled to Tehran to coordinate Hezbollah's operations in Yemen with Iran.¹⁷ Harb is not the only senior Hezbollah operative to be deployed to Yemen. Former Hezbollah special operations commander in southern Lebanon Abu Ali Tabatabai, who also spent time fighting in Syria, is likewise reported to have been sent to Yemen.¹⁸ Hezbollah has never been open about these deployments, but Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem did warn in April 2015 that Saudi Arabia would "incur very serious losses" and "pay a heavy price" as a result of its Yemen campaign.¹⁹

Beyond Yemen, Hezbollah's support for terrorist groups in the Gulf region also continues unabated. In January, authorities in Bahrain arrested six members of a terrorist cell tied to Hezbollah and blamed for a July 2015 explosion outside of a girls' school in Sitra.²⁰ In August 2015, Kuwaiti authorities raided a terrorist cell of 26 Shi'a Kuwaitis. The cell was accused of amassing "a large amount of weapons, ammunition, and explosives."²¹ After media outlets reported alleged links between the cell, Iran, and Hezbollah, the public prosecutor issued a media gag order on the investigation.²² In January 2016, a Kuwaiti court sentenced a Kuwaiti and an Iranian national to death for spying on behalf of Iran and Hezbollah.²³ In June, a court in Abu Dhabi found the wife of a "prominent Emirati" guilty of spying for Hezbollah.²⁴ The following month, a Kuwait court sentenced a Shi'a member of parliament in absentia for issuing statements deemed insulting to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and for calling on people to join Hezbollah.²⁵

In 2013, a Hezbollah sleeper cell was busted in the United Arab Emirates. According to court proceedings in April 2016, "the terrorist cell used sex and alcohol" to recruit a group of agents that provided "information about government, security, military and economic institutions as well as UAE's arms deals with various countries to the Hezbollah agents." The prosecution claimed that "two Emiratis, four Lebanese, and a Canadian-Egyptian woman" were blackmailed into participating in the spying scheme. The court case came shortly after the UAE convicted three Lebanese men with setting up a Hezbollah cell.²⁶

Set against this aggressive activity in the Gulf, it was little surprise that in March the GCC designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization over the "hostile actions of the militia who recruit the young people (of the Gulf) for terrorist acts."²⁷ The Arab League and the OIC followed suit within weeks.²⁸ In fact, this seemingly rapid series of condemnations was three years in the making. In June 2013, GCC countries came to the unanimous conclusion that

Hezbollah was a terrorist group, and several member states began taking discrete actions against the group's supporters in their countries.²⁹ In May 2014, Saudi authorities withdrew the business license of a Lebanese national linked to Hezbollah,³⁰ and a GCC offer to engage Iran in dialogue if Tehran changed its policy on Syria fell on deaf ears.³¹

In response, Hezbollah denied the accusations and accused the Saudis of trying to "silence" Hezbollah because of its refusal to ignore "the crimes the Saudis are committing in Yemen and elsewhere."³² Since then, Nasrallah has slammed the Saudis over the war in Yemen,³³ over its support for Sunni groups in Lebanon,³⁴ and over the beginnings of a rapprochement of sorts with Israel.³⁵ The regional unrest, according to Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of Iran's Majlis Council, is a result of "the U.S. and Israel" trying to "get Muslim countries entangled in domestic problems" using "takfiri groups, which are the puppets of the United States and their regional allies."³⁶

Hezbollah's intensified involvement in the Gulf is a function of the sustained geopolitical and sectarian tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These tensions spiked in January when Saudi Arabia executed al-Nimr on charges of sedition and taking up arms against Saudi security forces. The sheikh's death sparked outrage across the Shi'a world, and, in Iran, two Saudi diplomatic compounds were stormed in protest. Saudi Arabia sought condemnation of the attacks from the Arab League and the OIC, and both organizations responded accordingly. Lebanon, however, offered only "solidarity." This perceived slight spurred Saudi Arabia to cut off monetary support to Lebanon and pull funds from Lebanese banks.³⁷ Bahrain and the UAE fell in line with the Saudis, issuing travel warnings and travel bans, respectively, for Lebanon.³⁸ A month after the execution and protests, Saudi Arabia blacklisted four companies and three Lebanese businessmen, citing their relationships to Hezbollah.³⁹ The United States had designated these companies and individuals a year earlier, but the Saudi actions indicated a heightened focus on Hezbollah by the kingdom.⁴⁰

Nasrallah has tried to deflect these actions as Israeli machinations, but Hezbollah and Iran have, in fact, been increasingly active in the Gulf in recent years. Iranian, Hezbollah, and Saudi posturing all come against the backdrop of a Gulf that is concerned with a region post-Iran deal (aka Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA). Gulf leadership is wary of an Iranian financial windfall after the deal and the flexibility the regained cash gives Iran and of Hezbollah to destabilize the region. Sunni Gulf states are thus particularly sensitive to Iranian and Hezbollah activity in the Gulf in the year since the announcement of the JCPOA.

Nasrallah has tried to justify Hezbollah's overreach into proxy wars around the region by presenting the issue as a Lebanese national security threat. In July 2016, Sheikh Nabil Qaouq, the deputy head of Hezbollah's Executive Council, derided Saudi Arabia for supporting terrorism in Lebanon and throughout the region. The terrorists "who staged bombings in Beirut, Hermel and the Bekaa, and who abducted and slaughtered the (Lebanese) servicemen are al-Qaida's branch in Lebanon and Syria (Abdullah Azzam Brigades) and al-Nusra Front, and al-Nusra Front is today fighting with Saudi weapons," Qaouq charged. Qaouq accused the Saudis of continuing to arm Jabhat al-Nusra "although it has murdered us, executed our servicemen and continued to occupy our land in the Bekaa," noting that Saudi sponsorship of terrorism "poses a real threat to Lebanese

national security.”⁴¹

Alignment of Hezbollah and Iranian Interests

Hezbollah’s hardened posture toward the Gulf is the product of two interrelated factors. First, Hezbollah has grown ever closer with Iran, especially in the past few years through its tight operational cooperation with Tehran in Iraq and now—far more intimately—in Syria. To a certain extent, Hezbollah’s pique with Riyadh is a function of the spike in Saudi-Iranian tensions and Hezbollah’s commitment to the Iranian revolutionary concept of Wilayat el-Faqih (guardianship of the jurist). This doctrine, formulated by Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, holds that a Shi`a Islamic cleric—in this case, the leader of Iran—should serve as the supreme head of government and leader for Shi`a worldwide. Hezbollah is thus self-committed to the decrees of Iranian clerics, even when these do not seamlessly coincide with the group’s own sometimes competing goals. It should be noted that Iranian influence over Hezbollah decision-making goes beyond the principle of Wilayat el-Faqih and is also a product of personal relationships. In that regard, it is worth noting that according to some reports, while unconfirmed, Qassem Suleimani—head of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force—personally appointed the successors to the late Mustapha Badreddine, head of both Hezbollah’s military command in Syria and its terrorist wing.⁴²

The second factor underscores that sometimes Iran and Hezbollah’s goals are complementary, in whole or in part. In this case, Hezbollah has reasons of its own for taking extreme umbrage at Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies. Hezbollah finds itself on the ground in Syria fighting and incurring losses at the hands of Saudi-financed and -armed Sunni rebels (terrorists, in Hezbollah’s eyes), and it sees the Saudis as supporting anti-Shi`a groups elsewhere in the region as well. In December 2015, Iran’s Tasnim News reported that Hezbollah released a statement rejecting Riyadh’s call for an Arab anti-terrorism coalition, saying “it is not surprising to anyone that Saudi Arabia is committing terrorism itself, as it did in Yemen, as well as with its support for terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.”⁴³ Hezbollah officials have also blamed Riyadh for blocking political solutions to the presidential crisis in Lebanon,⁴⁴ for “committing genocide” in Yemen,⁴⁵ and seeking to normalize relations with Israel.⁴⁶

Analytically, Hezbollah’s pivot toward the Gulf should not be seen as a pivot away from Israel. To the contrary, Hezbollah sees a pernicious, budding alliance among the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel that is directly benefiting the Sunni “takfiri” militants it is fighting in Syria and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere in the region. And while Hezbollah is taking active measures to prepare for the next, eventual war with Israel, it is eager to avoid such a conflict at the present time given its significant investment of personnel and resources in the Syrian war next door and its desire not to give Israel a pretext to either enter that war on the side of the Sunni rebels or take advantage of Hezbollah’s deployment there to target the group’s military presence and rocket arsenal in south Lebanon.

The next war between Hezbollah and Israel is only a matter of time. The Syrian war may take precedence over Hezbollah’s desire to fight Israel, but it has not altered Hezbollah’s hardwired commitment to do so. In this regard, Iran and Hezbollah are largely on the same page, though the deployment of senior Iranians to the Syrian Golan suggests Tehran remains keen on finding ways to attack Israel in the near-term as well. Hezbollah likely agrees,

so long as this can be done in such a way as to minimize the Israeli retaliatory response. There are suggestions that Iran and Hezbollah, in the meantime, are focused on inflicting some measure of pain on the Saudis. According to one report, “the military wing of the Lebanese movement Hezbollah has been instructed by Iran to suspend operations against Israel and to target Saudi Arabia instead.”⁴⁷ While almost certainly an exaggeration, other reports indicate Iranian operations targeting the Saudis may already be in motion. For example, the *Manila Times* cited Saudi and Philippine sources describing an alleged Iranian terrorist plot against a Saudi passenger plane in Manila.⁴⁸ Aside from plots abroad, Gulf States are sensitive to Iranian and Hezbollah plots at home, especially in light of the sectarian instability in places like the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia⁴⁹ and Bahrain.⁵⁰

Tensions Coming to a Head

Hezbollah has a history of targeting Saudi interests, so threats that Riyadh would “pay a heavy price” for its role in the Yemen war struck a chord with Saudi officials.⁵¹ But two incidents in particular highlight how the current war of words between Hezbollah and the Gulf States (and Saudi Arabia in particular) may already be transforming into something more dangerous and operational.

Despite the devastation of the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, the man accused of orchestrating and executing the attack evaded capture for almost 20 years. Finally, in August 2015, Ahmed al-Mughassil, the military chief of Saudi Hezbollah, was apprehended in Beirut and deported to Saudi Arabia. Mughassil had allegedly lived in Lebanon for years under the protection of Hezbollah.⁵² The Farsi-speaking Mughassil may provide insight into the clandestine operations of Iran and its proxies around the region. In the current sectarian environment in the region, the circumstances of the arrest itself are a source of intrigue. Just as Hezbollah-Saudi tensions are mounting, a Hezbollah operative who evaded capture for years was suddenly caught and deported to Saudi Arabia.

Even more significant than this event is what happened next door in Syria nine months later. Hezbollah was dealt a heavy blow in May with the loss of its most prominent military figure, Mustafa Badreddine. Badreddine was killed in an explosion in Damascus while acting as head of Hezbollah’s External Security Organization and its forces in Syria, making him the most senior Hezbollah official killed since the death of former “chief of staff” Imad Mughniyah in 2008. In the 1980s, Badreddine was involved in terrorist attacks in Lebanon and Kuwait, with targets including U.S. embassies and Marine barracks. Badreddine escaped from prison in Kuwait in the early 1990s during the Iraqi invasion there. He fled back to Lebanon and rose to power in Hezbollah, aided by his expertise and family ties to Mughniyah. The two men, Badreddine and Mughniyah, led Hezbollah’s military activities for years and founded some of the organization’s most infamous units. Describing Badreddine, one Hezbollah operative said he was “more dangerous” than Mughniyah, his longtime “teacher in terrorism.”⁵³

The assassination of Badreddine shocked Hezbollah; it lost an especially qualified commander with a unique pedigree as the brother-in-law of Mughniyah and an intimate of Nasrallah. Yet most confounding to Hezbollah was that Israel, Hezbollah’s arch enemy, was not the assassin. Though Hezbollah outlets quickly pinned blame for the attack on Israel, Nasrallah soon took to the airwaves to personally announce that there was “no sign or proof leading us to the Israelis.” Nasrallah quickly added that Hezbollah is



Members of Hezbollah carry a portrait of one of the group's top commanders, Mustafa Badreddine, who was killed in an attack in Syria, during his funeral in southern Beirut on May 13, 2016. (ANWAR AMRO/AFP/Getty Images)

“not afraid to blame Israel when necessary,” but in this case, “our investigations led us to the [Sunni] terrorist groups.” Nasrallah could not have been clearer: “Within 24 hours we knew who killed Syed Mustafa, don’t just try to point at Israel.”⁵⁴

For some within Hezbollah, the Saudis will come up as likely players behind the scenes, possibly supporting the Sunni rebels Nasrallah says were behind the attack. Indeed, there would be historical precedent for this. The Saudis reportedly supported the Lebanese militants who targeted Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah in a failed assassination attempt in 1985.⁵⁵ In fact, the United States has been fairly open about that fact that it has partnered with GCC countries and others to counter Hezbollah’s activities.^a

Conclusion

At its start, Hezbollah defined itself as the “resistance” against Israel, a stance that once brought them enormous popularity throughout the region. And yet, since the start of the Syrian civil war, the group has lost over 1,000 fighters in battles against fellow Muslims, a far cry from its initial mission. In August 2016, Nasrallah threatened Israel with an imminent attack, recalling his triumph of

the last decade. Regardless, Hezbollah’s credibility as an anti-Israel force has been diminished since the 2006 Lebanon War.⁵⁶ Hezbollah is now seen throughout the region as the henchman of Iran in its propagation of sectarianism. No longer is Hezbollah a band of freedom fighters against Israeli occupation, but is rather a group upholding an occupation in Syria. “We are invaders,” a Hezbollah fighter conceded in a May news article. “This is our role now. Yes, I have many questions, but war is too complicated and I have a family to support.”⁵⁷

The war of words between Hezbollah and the Gulf States continues. In June, Nasrallah blasted the Sunni ruling family in Bahrain—calling them “midgets” and “servants” of the Saudi ruling family—after Manama decided to strip the country’s leading Shiite cleric of his citizenship.⁵⁸ Indeed, the Saudis appear more and more frequently as a target of Nasrallah’s ire in each successive speech he delivers. On July 29, Nasrallah made clear his belief that the Saudis are the reason the region’s conflicts persist. He laid blame for Sunni-Shia sectarianism at the feet of Riyadh as well and railed against signs of Saudi-Israeli normalization. The Saudis, Nasrallah concluded, are no different from al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. “The culture of Saudi Arabia is Wahhabi culture, the culture of Daesh and al-Nusra, even with a changed name...it’s a culture of killing and slaughter and siege and rejection of dialogue.”⁵⁹ From the Saudis, the same is heard in reverse. In January, the Saudi foreign minister had this to say about the group: “Hezbollah, Iran’s surrogate, tries to control Lebanon and wages war against the Syrian opposition—and in the process helps the Islamic State flourish.”⁶⁰

Were this to remain a war of words, it would be one thing. But recent events suggest it is already turning into something more operational and dangerous. **CTC**

a At the release of the State Department’s annual terrorist report in June, a senior U.S. official highlighted these efforts. “Confronting Iran’s destabilizing activities and its support for terrorism was a key element of our expanded dialogue with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, following the leaders’ summit at Camp David in May of [2015]. We’ve also expanded our cooperation with partners in Europe, South America, and West Africa to develop and implement strategies to counter the activities of Iranian-allied and sponsored groups, such as Hezbollah.” “Country Reports on Terrorism 2015 Special Briefing with Justin Siberell, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism,” U.S. Department of State press release, June 2, 2016.

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Al-Qa`ida Uncoupling: Jabhat al-Nusra's Rebranding as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham

By Aymenn Al-Tamimi

On July 28, 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra, which had previously identified itself as a branch of al-Qa`ida in Syria, announced the changing of its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham ('Conquest of al-Sham Front') in a video recording that for the first time revealed the appearance of its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani. The nominal decoupling of the organizations was approved and coordinated with al-Qa`ida's senior leadership and was designed to unify Islamist efforts in Syria and to make it more difficult for the United States and Russia to justify targeting the group. With its popularity on the rise and other rebel groups welcoming the announcement, the move appears to have paid off so far.

When Jabhat al-Nusra first emerged publicly on the scene of the Syrian civil war in January 2012, it did not publicly announce any ties to al-Qa`ida. For any close observer of jihadist media outlets, however, the fact that the group's media releases were disseminated on what were then al-Qa`ida's main internet forums—Shumukh al-Islam and al-Fida' al-Islam—showed there was at least an ideological if not organizational alignment.¹ With its full name being "Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahl al-Sham" (Support Front for the People of al-Sham), the group represented a wider trend since the outbreak of the Arab Spring of the emergence of organizations embodying al-Qa`ida in approach but not in name, exemplified foremost in the multiple Ansar al-Sharia (Supporters of sharia) brands in Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen.^a

All these groups shared a broader al-Qa`ida approach of at least trying to learn lessons from past experiences, particularly in Iraq, that were perceived to have damaged the al-Qa`ida brand. The idea

of openly declaring ties with al-Qa`ida was seen as strategically disadvantageous in light of this damaged brand. Indeed, senior Jabhat Fateh al-Sham official Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, whose real name is Mostafa Mahamed, illustrated this line of thinking in publicizing on his Telegram channel a quote from Atiyatullah al-Libi, who served as al-Qa`ida's Shura Council leader before being killed in a drone strike in 2011. Al-Libi argued that even if one assumed the existence of al-Qa`ida or had ties to al-Qa`ida, those links should not be declared because they only prove politically useful to the United States as the general public image of al-Qa`ida has been marred.²

By late 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra had acquired a status as an effective fighting force on the battlefield against the regime. When the United States designated the group a terrorist organization and identified it as an outgrowth of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which was then widely assumed to be an al-Qa`ida affiliate even though its own relationship with al-Qa`ida was highly ambiguous, the designation was met with widespread anger in rebel circles.³

Public Pledge

ISI's own designs to subsume Jabhat al-Nusra formally and expand into Syria under the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) changed the calculus somewhat. Abu Muhammad al-Julani, previously a senior deputy to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who had been dispatched to Syria around 2011 to build a jihadist presence,⁴ felt forced to respond to al-Baghdadi's April 2013 open threat to subsume Jabhat al-Nusra by affirming a "renewal" of his allegiance pledge (*bay`a*) to Ayman al-Zawahiri. It was the first time Jabhat al-Nusra had publicly declared a tie to al-Qa`ida. In affirming a *bay`a* publicly, al-Julani hoped and expected—correctly—that al-Zawahiri would intervene in his favor. In his letter to both Jabhat al-Nusra and ISI, al-Zawahiri rebuked al-Julani for declaring the allegiance pledge without his consultation, likely a reflection of Atiyatullah al-Libi's thinking, but ordered the dissolution of ISIS and for ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra to keep their operations to Iraq and Syria respectively and work together.⁵ In the end, ISIS remained in Syria, while Jabhat al-Nusra began emphasizing more openly its affiliation with al-Qa`ida, even incorporating the moniker "Al-Qa`ida organization in the land of al-Sham" into its banners.⁶

Despite initial concerns voiced among other Syrian rebel factions about the open proclamation of ties to al-Qa`ida, the general trend of cooperation between Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups continued through 2013. The group's wider standing was enhanced by defections of foreign fighters to ISIS, giving Jabhat al-Nusra even more of a Syrian image.⁷ In addition, Jabhat al-Nusra eventually took the side of rebel factions in moving against ISIS in the wider infighting that broke out in January 2014, culminating in the official disavowal of ISIS by al-Qa`ida and the withdrawal of ISIS from Idlib, Latakia, Hama, and Deir ez-Zor provinces by end of the following month. It was also amid the infighting that the first hints

a Jabhat al-Nusra's brand was slightly different in that it emerged in the specific context of the Syrian civil war, thus the name formulation with the idea of supporting the Sunnis of Syria against an oppressive regime. For comparison, other al-Qa`ida-linked groups in Syria, such as the Turkestan Islamic Party's Syria branch that was set up by Uyghur refugees who had been living in Turkey, have similarly adopted the formulation of 'Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham'.

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of the issue of ties to al-Qa`ida in relation to the Syrian battlefield came up, as per a message by al-Zawahiri released on January 23, 2014, entitled “Urgent appeal to our people in al-Sham.”⁸

In this speech, al-Zawahiri commended the jihad in Syria as a stepping stone to the revival of the caliphate and the gate to the liberation of Jerusalem. Further, al-Zawahiri emphasized the following, which would form a basis for the formation of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham two and a half years later:

The brotherhood of Islam between us is stronger than all the organizational ties that can come and go and change. Your unity, union, and alliance is more important, mightier, and more precious to us than any organizational tie. For your unity, union, and unity of your ranks come above organizational and party affiliation. Indeed, those organizational and party ties should be sacrificed if they conflict with your mutual solidarity, unity, and coming together in one rank as a structured edifice.

Even so, Jabhat al-Nusra did not break ties with al-Qa`ida. The proclamation of the caliphate and the defeat of Jabhat al-Nusra by the Islamic State in eastern Syria by July 2014, where the group had some of its strongest assets with Deir ez-Zor province’s oil wealth, provoked a sense of crisis. With the lack of any formal governing authority to rival the Islamic State, leaked recordings suggested imminent plans to proclaim an Islamic emirate in Syria.⁹ Though no emirate was officially announced,^b a harsher side of Jabhat al-Nusra began to emerge in the setting up of a Dar al-Qada^c judicial body in several locales, officially independent but in reality a front group for Jabhat al-Nusra, breaking with the previous status quo of joint participation in Shari`i Committees with other factions. Further, Jabhat al-Nusra began moving against the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF), a Free Syrian Army coalition that the group had previously worked with in the removal of ISIS from Idlib.¹⁰ The focus in particular was on control of border towns, and it is clear the group perceived SRF as being cultivated as a Western proxy force to undermine Jabhat al-Nusra. By November 2014, all of SRF was expelled from Idlib¹¹ in a wider move partly in response to U.S. air-strikes targeting the supposed Khorasan Group of al-Qa`ida veterans in Syria.

As a result, Jabhat al-Nusra gained primary or sole control of a number of localities in the province. This included the Druze area of Jabal al-Summaq in Idlib province, where Jabhat al-Nusra forced the communities to renounce their Druze faith, demolish their shrines, and abide by Jabhat al-Nusra religious regulations, even though people there had already been forced to renounce their religion in late November 2013 under pressure from ISIS and that first renunciation had never been officially annulled.¹² In 2015, the Nusra Dar al-Qada in Hureitan implemented a number of executions of homosexuals, alleged committers of incest, and alleged cells working for the regime.¹³ In Darkush, the Dar al-Qada has imposed regulations on education including the banning of subjects like music and the segregation of more mature students by gender.¹⁴

^b Jabhat al-Nusra clarified that although its goal is the establishment of an emirate, it had not announced its existence yet. For the clarification statement issued on July 12, 2014, with translation, see pietervanostaeyen.com.

^c This translates to ‘House of Judges.’ A number of branches were set up in areas controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra or where it has had a strong influence, such as in Darkush and Salqin (controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra) in Idlib province and Hureitan (where the Dar al-Qada enjoys broader support).



Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)

Calls for a Split

It appears that on multiple occasions in the period of 2012 to 2015, foreign backers of the insurgency attempted to persuade Jabhat al-Nusra to break ties with al-Qa`ida in the hope of forming a wider coalition and group that could be supported. A notable attempt came in March 2015 in an initiative backed by Qatar,¹⁵ but it was ultimately rebuffed, even as Jabhat al-Nusra then came together with the salafi group Ahrar al-Sham and other groups to form the Jaysh al-Fath coalition—backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey¹⁶—that expelled the regime from Idlib city and other towns in the province.

Yet the formation of Jaysh al-Fath did not obscure internal tensions that had emerged within Jabhat al-Nusra or tensions that existed with other groups, in particular Ahrar al-Sham,^d as notions of a unified rebel government in Idlib ultimately failed. By mid-July 2015, the internal tensions became more apparent with the sidelining of two important figures, Abu Mariya al-Qahtani and Saleh al-Hamawi, both of whom previously served in the eastern region. They had distinguished themselves as the leading ‘pragmatists’ to have emerged from Jabhat al-Nusra, and both were likely open to dropping ties with al-Qa`ida given their emphasis on unifying¹⁷ Is-

^d The two groups in Idlib are officially in an alliance with open, prolonged warfare between them a distant prospect, but Ahrar al-Sham at the local level often acts or tries to act as a restraint on harsher actions by its ally. For example, see Aymenn al-Tamimi, “Additional notes on the Druze of Jabal al-Summaq,” aymennjawad.org, October 6, 2015. This amounts more to *local balancing* rather than *strategic balancing*, to use Maxwell Martin’s terminology. For further explanation, see Maxwell Martin, “A Strong Ahrar al-Sham is a strong Nusra front,” *Jihadology*, April 7, 2015. Ideologically, Jabhat al-Nusra’s Abu Firas al-Suri (subsequently killed in a U.S. airstrike in April 2016) launched a polemical attack in his own capacity on Ahrar al-Sham in September 2015, castigating the group as sell-outs for its willingness to cooperate with “the states of *kufr* [disbelief] and systems of apostasy” and affirming protection for “heretical” minorities like the Ismailis who must either convert to Islam or be fought.

lamist rebel efforts.^{18 e}

With Syria's northwest firmly established as Jabhat al-Nusra's main base in the country by 2016, it became evident that al-Qa`ida saw the area as the best hope for an emirate project to lay the groundwork for the revival of the caliphate. Unsurprisingly therefore, al-Qa`ida dispatched numerous senior operatives to Syria, a number of whom were killed in drone strikes. A case-in-point was the Egyptian Rifai Taha, an al-Qa`ida-linked former leader of the Egyptian al-Gama'a al-Islamiya. Taha was killed in a drone strike in April 2016¹⁹ (though it is not clear if he was an intended target), and the most reasonable interpretation of the reason for his dispatch to Syria is that he was to play some kind of mediating role between Jabhat al-Nusra and other factions in the hope of creating a merger. This followed on from merger and unity initiative discussions in January and February 2016, which faltered as Ahrar al-Sham in particular insisted on Jabhat al-Nusra breaking ties with al-Qa`ida.²⁰

Al-Zawahiri indicated his own hopes and expectations in a speech recorded in the February–March period and released in May 2016 entitled “Go forth to al-Sham.” He started by declaring Syria to be “the hope of the Muslim Ummah, for it is the only popular revolution from the revolutions of the Arab Spring that has chosen the correct path, the path of *dawa* and jihad to establish the sharia and implement its ruling, and strive to establish the rightly-guided Caliphate, not the Caliphate of Ibrahim al-Badri” (referring to al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State). For this reason, al-Zawahiri explained, “our obligation today is to defend the jihad in al-Sham against the conspiracies” of the West and regional powers striving to set up a non-Islamic regime in Syria. To support the jihad in Syria would require preserving the “unity of the mujahideen.” Unsurprisingly, this theme of the unity of jihadis in Syria led al-Zawahiri to turn again to the issue of Jabhat al-Nusra’s ties to al-Qa`ida.

Here, al-Zawahiri clearly tied al-Qa`ida’s future to the prospect of an Islamic government in Syria, saying that if the people of Syria and the “mujahideen” establish such an entity led by an imam, “their choice is our choice.” For, al-Zawahiri explained, al-Qa`ida is not seeking authority, but rather seeks “the rule of sharia ... We do not wish to rule the Muslims, but rather we wish to be ruled as Muslims by Islam.” Such aspirations, he argued, are ultimately more important than any “organizational affiliation,” even as he made clear he did not believe that the malign powers would simply be

content if Jabhat al-Nusra parted ways with al-Qa`ida but would seek to further humiliate it.

The ideas articulated in this speech reflect long-standing concepts in al-Zawahiri’s strategic vision as articulated in his memoir *Knights under the Prophet’s Banner*. As outlined by Paul Cruickshank,²¹ this memoir, the first edition of which came out shortly after the 9/11 attacks, argues that al-Qa`ida needs to control territory in the “heart of the Islamic world” (by which he clearly meant the Arab world) in order to have a springboard for the revival of the caliphate. Second, the jihadist movement needs to win popular support to achieve these goals. This contrasts very strongly with the Islamic State’s rejection of the requirement to win popular support, arguing instead that religious precepts can be established by force.

Tipping Point

What gave even more urgency this time to renewed discussion of Jabhat al-Nusra’s relationship with al-Qa`ida were proposals in July 2016 for U.S.–Russian coordination to target the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. In return, Russia was to refrain from targeting rebel groups backed by the United States and put pressure on the regime to ground its air force.²² This proposal was formulated in part to address Russian complaints about the intermingling of rebel groups with Jabhat al-Nusra.

Thus, the suggestion to form a new and officially independent entity now conferred advantages, especially from al-Qa`ida’s perspective. First, from the propaganda angle, any U.S. and Russian targeting of this independent entity would show that the problem was not really about al-Qa`ida at all but rather their animosity to Islamic rule. Second, since the al-Qa`ida affiliation caused consternation in rebel circles, the idea of an officially independent entity would put the ball in the court of those factions to come together and join forces, especially groups claiming an Islamist vision. Third, the shift could offer a chance to heal the rift with the pragmatic dissenters like al-Qahtani and al-Hamawi who had questioned Jabhat al-Nusra’s direction and the insistence on official ties. Al-Qahtani in particular had become a member of a body founded in July 2016 known as the Assembly of al-Sham Scholars, which aims in particular to establish an independent supreme judicial authority to arbitrate among different factions, urging them to come together and accept such an authority.^g

Therefore, in the run-up to the announcement by al-Julani of the rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, it did not come as a shock that pro-al-Qa`ida outlets were giving hints of an impending “break” of ties. On July 25, 2016, al-Fustaat, a jihadist Telegram outlet, put up a post indicating that “Jabhat al-Nusra will soon sever ties with al-Qa`ida with the permission of Sh. Ayman al-Zawahiri.”²³ Illustrating even further the guiding hand of al-Qa`ida, al-Julani’s video announcement was preceded by several hours by an audio message from Ahmad Hassan Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, a senior al-Qa`ida operative²⁴ who was identified for the first time as al-Zawahiri’s deputy. The fact that the audio message was released

e Al-Hamawi was officially expelled from Jabhat al-Nusra in a statement issued by the group on July 15, 2015, citing “his lack of compliance with the politics and regulations of the group,” but the group added that the issuing of the decision was delayed by around six months in the hope that he would fall in line again. He responded that he had been intent on leaving the group on account of the previously leaked emirate plans and decried the notion of “violation of the group’s politics” as a reference to his critiques of “Shari‘i violations that harm the group, the field, and the people of al-Sham, foremost the inclination of the group towards extremism according to what I see.” A copy of the Jabhat al-Nusra statement on the expulsion of Saleh Hamawi is available at <https://justpaste.it/nusraexpelsalehhamawi>. Saleh al-Hamawi’s response to the statement is available at <https://justpaste.it/mei2>.

f The Arabic transcript of the speech indicates it was recorded in Jumada al-Awal 1437 AH, which corresponds approximately to the period February 10–March 9, 2016, and thus followed on from the breakdown in the latest round of talks at the time regarding Jabhat al-Nusra’s ties to al-Qa`ida. Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Go forth to al-Sham,” As-Sahab Media, May 7, 2016.

g Besides al-Qahtani, the new body includes Saudi cleric Abdullah al-Muheisseni, who is a leading judicial authority aligned with al-Qa`ida in Jaysh al-Fateh and the main figure in the Jihad Callers Centre that primarily undertakes *dawa* work in Idlib, and the head of the judicial committee in Ahrar al-Sham, Ahmad Muhammad Najib. “Announcement of the formation of the assembly of al-Sham Scholars,” El-Dorar, July 15, 2016.

by Jabhat al-Nusra's media wing al-Manara al-Bayda suggested that he was already present in Syria. In the message,^h al-Masri urged Jabhat al-Nusra to take the necessary steps according to the suggestions of al-Zawahiri's prior talking points, in particular the need to protect the jihad in Syria and the concept of unity among "mujahid" factions as something of greater importance than organizational ties and affiliations. He harkened all the way back to al-Zawahiri's message in January 2014, an excerpt of which was replayed in his recording.

Far from being a spontaneous move to split from al-Qa`ida, the build-up to al-Julani's announcement of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham was actually a process guided by al-Qa`ida as part of a strategy of embedding Jabhat al-Nusra more deeply within the wider Syrian insurgency. In effect, Jabhat al-Nusra was reverting to the pre-ISIS era in terms of relations between al-Qa`ida and post-Arab Spring jihadist entities—that is, al-Qa`ida in approach but not formal title.ⁱ Al-Julani himself made al-Qa`ida's hand clear in his video announcement. He extended thanks to the al-Qa`ida leadership, in particular both al-Zawahiri and al-Masri, for their stance and assessment of the situation in Syria by supposedly putting the interests of the people of Syria and the jihad above organizational ties. Revealingly, he noted "their blessed leadership has and shall continue to be an exemplar." Al-Julani explained that "in accordance with the general guidelines and directives" of the al-Qa`ida leadership, it was decided to cancel the name of Jabhat al-Nusra and form Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, ostensibly having "no link with any external entity."^j It is worth paying closer attention to this wording because it does not literally say that there is no link with al-Qa`ida but rather an "external entity." The wording still allows for the possibility of links with al-Qa`ida operatives who have entered into Syria, something that has indeed happened.^j

Ideologically too, nothing really distinguishes the new Jabhat Fateh al-Sham from its predecessor and al-Qa`ida. This becomes apparent in the manifesto issued by the group²⁶ as well as al-Julani's video announcement, with reference to establishing God's religion and implementing the rule of God's law. The ideological continuity was also clear in the citation of Usama bin Ladin with regard to the idea of the interests of the Ummah as the foremost priority, followed by the state, the group, and then the individual, a concept that had been invoked by al-Fustaat in its hints of an impending announcement. Judging by al-Julani's outfit appearance in the video, a strong emulation of bin Ladin was apparent.

Windfall

A number of factions in Syria issued reactions to the formation of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, generally welcoming the move as a positive step forward. That said, an interesting contrast emerges in the terminology deployed. For example, the Turkestan Islamic Party, a Uighur al-Qa`ida-affiliated group with a significant presence in Syria, followed the literal wording as per al-Julani's video in reference to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's affiliations: "We have heard about this new entity, and this praiseworthy blessed step that the Jabhat al-Nusra group undertook, when it decided to operate under a new name—Jabhat Fateh al-Sham—and cut its links with any external entity."²⁷ The Turkestan Islamic Party emphasized the need for unity to overthrow the regime and establish the rule of God's law. Jund al-Aqsa, another al-Qa`ida-linked faction considered more hardline in its approach than Jabhat al-Nusra, also appeared to welcome the move, concluding with an expression of hope that the new Jabhat Fateh al-Sham could establish Islamic authority and the rule of sharia. The group avoided speaking of a "split" or "breaking of ties" with al-Qa`ida, stressing that ideological affiliation mattered more.²⁸

In contrast, Ahrar al-Sham went by the widely publicized interpretation of a break-off from al-Qa`ida: "The Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement blesses the announcement issued to dissolve Jabhat al-Nusra, and break the connection with the internationally designated al-Qa`ida organization... This announcement that the people of al-Sham awaited for a long time."²⁹ Ahrar al-Sham expressed hope that the move would lead to increased unity among "all the factions of the revolution," preserving and increasing the gains of the revolution. Clearly in keeping with what al-Qa`ida wants, Ahrar al-Sham vocally denounced any U.S. and Russian airstrikes that might target the new Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, noting the supposed "end of any presence of the al-Qa`ida organization in Syria."

Far less positive was the U.S.-backed faction Division 13, which was set up in 2013 and primarily based in the Idlib town of Ma'arat al-Nu'man until it clashed with Jabhat al-Nusra in March 2016 and was consequently driven out. The group emphasized that "change is established through deeds and actions, not words," renewing its long-standing call for al-Julani's group to submit to the arbitration of a Shari'i court and return weapons it confiscated from Division 13.³⁰

While Division 13 is too small and local a faction to put pressure on Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to submit to its demands, the wider issue of proving change through actions rather than words is an important one in the long-term,^k especially as regards the prospects of merging with other rebel factions that do not fully or partly share the jihadist vision. Ultimately, a problem here is the fact that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham is essentially calling on factions to come together to form an Islamic government on its own terms. Considering how difficult it has been to establish a unified system of governance in Idlib province, there are no reasonable grounds to suppose a real

^h The audio message was notably released without a title for the speech on YouTube.com on July 28, 2016.

ⁱ Bilad al-Sham Media, a long-standing outlet for Maldivian fighters in Jabhat al-Nusra (and subsequently Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), illustrated this line of thought very clearly with an extended post on July 28, 2016, just prior to the al-Julani video announcement, noting that the "aims, goals and strategies" of al-Qa`ida have been enhanced without declaring ties to "al-Qa`ida Central."

^j Careful attention to wording must also be applied to Mostafa Mahamed's interview with CNN following the rebranding, in which he stressed "we are completely independent. That means we don't report to anyone. We don't receive our directives from any external entity." Bryony Jones, Clarissa Ward, and Salma Abdelaziz, "Al-Nusra rebranding: New name, same aim? What you need to know," CNN, August 2, 2016.

^k See the transcript of al-Hayat's interview with Ahrar al-Sham's Labib Nahas, in which he described the supposed distancing of Jabhat al-Nusra from al-Qa`ida as a "positive step" but stressed that "practical steps have to follow it to establish that the breaking of the connection is not only organizational." It should also be noted that Nahas considers Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's attempts to explain itself in public relations outreach to the outside world as a good sign in this regard. "Full transcript of Labib Nahas' interview with the al-Hayat outlet," All4Syria, August 13, 2016.

merger with more 'mainstream' major factions in the near future, including Ahrar al-Sham. Besides the inability to establish a unified system of governance and judicial authority in areas already out of regime control, there are also sensitive issues like treatment of minorities that prove major obstacles to other rebel groups coming to terms with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's vision. Since more 'mainstream' factions desire some sort of acceptability on the international stage in relation to Syria's future, the notion of accepting policies of systematic forced conversions of minorities like Druze and Alawites¹ by merging with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham would be very difficult to swallow and would serve to discredit any international recognition of political legitimacy for the insurgency.

In the meantime, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham as a military actor has greatly increased its popularity. The group is widely perceived in media and on the ground³¹ to have spearheaded the rebel counter-offensive from the direction of the southwest Aleppo countryside that was bolstered by increased foreign support³² and ultimately

broke the regime siege on the eastern parts of Aleppo city.^m In keeping with the concept of the push for unity as one of the key reasons behind the formation of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, an audio message was released on August 5 in which al-Julani highlighted unity among factions in their military efforts as the foremost factor behind success in the efforts to break the regime siege.³³

From the U.S. perspective, these developments only solidify the dilemma of how to put pressure on the regime and Russia in order to facilitate a political transition without empowering Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. The prospects of being able to target al-Qa'ida operatives moving into Syria have also been made much more difficult, as further airstrikes will almost certainly inflame popular opinion against the United States. Far from representing a loss for al-Qa'ida,ⁿ the rebranding of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham amounts to an outsmarting of the United States by al-Qa'ida, even if no grand merger with other rebel factions emerges anytime soon—a much more disastrous scenario. **CTC**

¹ Forced conversions were alluded to somewhat obliquely by al-Julani in his interview with Al Jazeera in May 2015. When a number of Druze villagers in the locality of Qalb Lawza were killed in a confrontation with Jabhat al-Nusra members in June 2015, several rebel factions, in condemning the incident, referred to the Druze by name, thereby not endorsing the forced conversions, whereas Jabhat al-Nusra, while also condemning the incident, did not. A full translation of the relevant part of the al-Julani interview can be found at pietervanostaejen.com. For the contrasting statements on the Qalb Lawza events, see Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The massacre of Druze villagers in Qalb Lawza, Idlib province," aymennjawad.org, June 15, 2015.

^m A large number of rebel groups were involved in the campaign, ranging from the more 'mainstream' Fatah Halab coalition that is more active inside Aleppo city to the Jaysh al-Fatah coalition pushing from the countryside to the southwest of Aleppo. A Jabhat Fateh al-Sham member, Abu Saeed al-Halabi, credited Fatah Halab for "eliminating regime's artillery, ATGM positions, heavy guns, and tanks" in a tweet on August 5, 2016.

ⁿ This interpretation of the formation of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham as a weakening of al-Qa'ida is advanced by Clint Watts, "It's not you, it's me. Al-Qa'ida lost Jabhat al-Nusra. Now what?" *War on the Rocks*, July 29, 2016.

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The Hard March to Mosul: A Frontline Report

By Derek Henry Flood

There is rising speculation that a constellation of Iraqi forces will launch an operation to take back Mosul from the Islamic State this fall, supported by U.S. and coalition air power. But a trip made by the author this month to the frontlines around the city suggests such a near-term timetable may be optimistic. While the Islamic State has shown a singularity of purpose in holding onto its caliphate's second city, there continues to be significant discord and distrust between the many forces and militias arrayed against it. This has slowed progress in even reaching the city periphery, as has fierce resistance put up by the Islamic State in surrounding areas. These dynamics mean that ejecting the terrorist group from Mosul and preventing its return will be an even more challenging task.

Since the leader of the so-called Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared a caliphate from the pulpit of Mosul's Great Mosque of al-Nuri on June 29, 2014, the recapture of Iraq's second-largest city has been a principal objective of Baghdad and the international coalition combating the group. In recent weeks there has been speculation that an operation to take back Mosul is imminent. Some have suggested the operation will be launched as early as October, while Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has said it will begin before the end of the year.^{1 a}

But a reporting trip by this author to the frontlines around Mosul alongside Kurdish peshmerga commanders in early August 2016 suggests this timetable may be optimistic at best. In contrast to the Islamic State's hegemony over the Sunni areas it controls and its fierce determination to defend the most critical city in its caliphate, Iraq's highly fissiparous military and militia landscape

maintains a common enemy but not a common cause.

This article first describes the array of Iraqi forces and militias arranged on various fronts around Mosul, comparing the discord and distrust among these groups with the Islamic State's singularity of purpose. Drawing on several days spent with peshmerga commanders on the Makhmour and Bashiqa fronts as well as interviews with civilians from Mosul and other areas of Iraq who had fled Islamic State rule in 2014, the article then describes the ways in which the Islamic State has slowed the advance of its opponents around the city. Finally, it looks at how these dynamics will make retaking Mosul from the Islamic State and preventing its return harder still.

Part 1: The Fronts Around Mosul

The frontline encircling much of Mosul in northwestern Iraq's Nineva Governorate is deeply fractured among state, sub-state, and non-state armed actors. To gain insight into how the conflict is unfolding on the ground, the author met with Kurdish military officials at the Nineva Operations Command base southeast of Mosul, at the Makhmour front, and at their local command center overlooking the Islamic State-controlled town of Bashiqa northeast of Mosul. The author also met with Iranian Kurdish guerillas from the Kurdistan Freedom Party (Parti Azadi Kurdistan-PAK) at a more vulnerable frontline position further toward Bashiqa.

Because the Islamic State does not align itself with other insurgent movements but has either subsumed or intimidated competitors, it is the sole militant actor in areas it controls. In contrast, on what is ostensibly the Iraqi government side, there is a constellation of armed groups including the Iraqi army, the Kurdish peshmerga, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) guerillas, the Iraqi police, Sunni Arab tribal militias collectively known as Hashd al-Watani (the National Mobilization Forces), an umbrella of Shi'a Arab militias referred to collectively as Hashd al-Shabi (the Popular Mobilization



A view of the Islamic State-held town of Bashiqa in Nineva Governorate as seen from a hilltop joint Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish position called Lufa on August 8, 2016. (Derek Henry Flood)

^a In the spring of 2015 similar pronouncements were made about an impending Mosul offensive, which failed to materialize. David Alexander and Phil Stewart, "U.S. sees Iraqi offensive to retake Mosul in April-May time frame," Reuters, February 19, 2015.

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Units), both Sunni and Shi'a Turkmen militias, Christian groups like the Assyrian militia Dwekh Nawsha,² and the Turkish army above the Islamic State-controlled town of Bashiqa.³

The staggering number of groupings is a function of the demographics of the area. Unlike the overwhelmingly Sunni Arab-populated cities of Anbar Governorate, Mosul was, prior to its jihadist occupation, a relatively complex cosmopolitan center with an urban middle class and religious and ethnic diversity, including groups little known beyond the now-decimated borders of northwestern Iraq.

As of mid-August 2016, a string of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)-dominated peshmerga units lead most of the fronts ringing Mosul, starting in Makhmour some 60 miles southeast of the city. In a broad arc from Mosul's southeast to its northwest, peshmerga bases go north to the Gwer front, continuing farther north to the Bashiqa front about 10 miles northeast of Mosul, the positions giving Mosul a wide berth. Around Bashiqa things become more complex with the presence of the Turkish military^b and Hashd al-Watani militia representing Ankara's foreign policy, which favors Sunni interests. Directly north of Mosul is a cluster of minor Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac Christian militias around the virtually deserted area of Telukuf (Tel Askaf) in the Ninewa Plains region and continuing northwest with peshmerga positions all the way to the Sinjar front. Members of the Iraqi Army's 15th Division along with local Sunni Arab tribesmen have been amassed around Islamic State-held Qayyara approximately 50 miles south of Mosul.

However, anti-Islamic State forces are absent to Mosul's west and southwest. In sum, even as progress in retaking minor villages has been made as of mid-August 2016, the Islamic State is far from completely surrounded. Aside from Qayyara, the Islamic State is heavily entrenched in the surrounding towns of Tal Afar in Nineveh Governorate itself and has been keeping security forces busy in Hawija⁴ in Kirkuk Governorate and the town of Shirqat⁵ in Salahaddin Governorate. These are locales where Sunni Arab discontent remained high during the years of Nouri al-Maliki's much-criticized, Shi'a majority-led government in Baghdad.

Part 2: Mosul and the 'Big Game'

The only unifying factor among all these groups is their antipathy toward the Islamic State. Each armed actor is suspicious of the other, and it is widely feared that should the Islamic State be de-

^b The Turkish military has a camp near the Bashiqa front that it claims is there to assist the peshmerga while reportedly training Hashd al-Watani militia members in advance of Mosul. Ankara claims its forces are present at the behest of Baghdad even as Iraqi officials claim the Turkish presence is violating its 'sovereignty.' Iran is known to have advisors on the ground in Iraq to monitor the fight against the Islamic State as well as aid in checking its advances in what Iranian Brigadier General Ahmadreza Pourdastan describes as a "proxy war." With both Turkish and Iranian state forces present to varying degrees around of Mosul, the fact that the peshmerga are either hosting or benignly tolerating guerilla forces fighting security forces in both Turkey and Iran is indicative of the dangerously divergent agendas of the anti-Islamic State coalition on the ground. For now, the PKK and PAK are positioned outside Mosul with their sights—like the peshmerga—tightly focused on the Islamic State even as Turkish troops and Iranian military advisors are present in the same combat theater. See Sardar Sattar, "Turkish Troops Won't Withdraw from Bashiqa: Envoy in Erbil," Bas News, July 28, 2016; "Abadi stresses Barzani to unite the position the withdrawal of Turkish troops and the preservation of the sovereignty of Iraq," All Iraq News, December 8, 2015; "Commander: Iranian Army Monitoring Enemies' Moves Beyond Borders," Fars News Agency, April 16, 2016.



Coalition airstrikes have been described as essential in rolling back Islamic State advances in Ninewa Governorate. Here, a house lays in ruin along the Makhmour front on August 1, 2016. (Derek Henry Flood)

feated inside Mosul and routed on the battlefield, there will be a possibly violent struggle for power among the ad hoc, anti-Islamic State ground coalition. The problem plaguing the hoped-for Mosul operation is the nagging question of what a future Iraq that has been festering since at least 2003 should look like. Each of these identity-based movements has an agenda that is incompatible with others, with each group seeking either a sectarian or ethno-linguistic advantage.

When it comes to the Kurds, they have rivalries both with other groupings and among their own people.^c Peshmerga troops have gone on the offensive against the Islamic State in order to secure ethnic-Kurdish majority villages and towns or those of other minorities languishing under Islamic State rule.⁶ But these forces, which are an underequipped force and positioned in primarily a defensive posture to protect Kurdish-populated areas, are hesitant to push into Mosul proper.

The overarching mission of the peshmerga and the Kurds' Asayish intelligence apparatus is to protect their de facto Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) statelet, expand its borders if possible where relevant, and prevent Islamic State incursions into the relatively safe provincial capitals of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulimaniyah.

Kurdish leaders have been reluctant to move on Mosul without hammering out a political settlement between Baghdad and Erbil, the capital of the largely autonomous KRG. A peshmerga officer who spoke to the author stated that from his personal perspective, "Mosul is a big game"⁷ in that Iraq's Kurds do not want to lose Mosul as a major potential bargaining chip in relation to their cherished vision of political self-determination.

While such calculations may cause delay, it is possible that the Kurds may join efforts to liberate Mosul if other Iraqi armed groups move forward. A bit like the race to Berlin at the end of the Second World War, the Kurds do not want to lose leverage with Baghdad

^c Although currently presenting a united front, the peshmerga are divided among the KRG's two traditionally ruling parties, the KDP and the PUK. It is worth recalling that the KDP and PUK fought an internecine war just two decades ago. The two parties effectively have two separate command structures for the peshmerga. Although both the KDP and PUK see the Islamic State as an existential threat to Kurdish identity creating some unity of effort, a deep chasm remains between the parties.

by allowing the Iraqi army or Arab militias to get there first. Concerned over Kurdish separatist ambitions,^d Prime Minister Abadi has vacillated on the issue of Kurdish participation, speaking of cooperation in July^e but then in mid-August insisting that only Iraqi state forces would enter Mosul.⁹ In jockeying for position, the chief Kurdish commander of the Makhmour front, General Najat Ali, then insisted the Mosul operation must involve the Kurds as principal armed actors.^{10 e}

But peshmerga officers believe the coalition must be very careful in its approach to urban Mosul lest it become a painfully prolonged, street-to-street siege as in the case of Kobane in the fall of 2014.¹¹ They have instead put forward an alternate idea whereby an indigenous uprising is stoked by external support to push the Islamic State out of the city by local residents who know it best.

In contrast to the hesitation of the Kurds, Arab forces have been avowedly eager to enter Mosul. The “Conquest Operation for the Liberation of Ninevah” began on March 24, 2016, with the Iraqi Army as the tip of the spear and the peshmerga and other groups meant to play a rear guard role.¹² In July, the Iraqi air force dropped a large number of leaflets over Mosul and the Islamic State-controlled town of Shirqat,¹³ urging people to cooperate with Iraqi security forces en route to the area.

In a highly degraded security environment where intra-group rivalry has become a zero-sum game, the deciding factors for many armed Iraqi groups on whether to take part in the Mosul offensive has more to do with maneuvering for future advantage vis-à-vis their peers than the overall future of Iraq. Speaking to fears noted above, several peshmerga officers who spoke to the author expressed grave concerns that there could be an armed confrontation between their units and the Iraqi military or Arab militias if/once Mosul is finally liberated.¹⁴ This prospect, the officers indicated, makes them extremely wary of collaborating in earnest with the Arab-majority ranks of the Iraqi army. The distrust, they stated, stems partly from the still painful legacy of the notorious al-Anfal campaign where Kurdish-majority villages were ruthlessly attacked with chemical weapons¹⁵ during the latter phase of the Iran-Iraq war.^f



On August 1, 2016, Peshmerga officers at the Makhmour front discuss their wariness at working with the Iraqi Army in pre-Mosul operations for fear of a post-Mosul power vacuum. (Derek Henry Flood)

Part 3: The Slow Advance to Mosul

In contrast to its deeply fractured enemies, the Islamic State has established itself as the hegemonic^g militant group in the areas in and around Mosul, with comparatively unified structures of command and control.^h

Given their losses in Ramadi and Fallujah and with Iraqi military pressure in Hawija, Qayyara, and Shirqat, the Islamic State will likely attach very high priority to holding Mosul. For it to ultimately lose the largest city under its control would be a critical blow to the group's claim to legitimacy as the founder of a new caliphate.

Although the jihadis are estimated to be waning militarily,¹⁶ they actively maintain a highly aggressive battlefield posture, displaying few signs of outright defeat. As the peshmerga and their frontline partners such the Iranian PAK seek to defend majority Kurdish as well as Christian villages while containing jihadist expansion, skilled Islamic State snipers and mortar units attack Kurdish patrols and positions in order to maintain a strategic status quo at the edge of their withering caliphate.¹⁷ The Islamic State has, according to a senior Kurdish commander, been highly innovative in its war-fighting tactics such as deftly planting remotely detonated mines in dark of night and armoring suicide attack vehicles, which makes them even more difficult to defend against. This has all been

d Baghdad fears Kurdish forces seek to annex long disputed territories of Ninewa, Kirkuk, Salahaddin, and Diyala Governorates to enlarge the KRG and thus reduce the energy-rich territory ostensibly administered by Baghdad.

e Though Mosul has historically been an Arab-dominated city, peshmerga may well also have an interest in protecting urban areas traditionally having or having had concentrations of Sunni Kurds. These include the Nabi Yunis on the east bank of the Tigris and outlying neighborhoods like Azadi and Gobjalil (Gogchali) in the city's eastern edge as well as agrarian swaths to the east that are home to minority Shabak, Kakai, and Yazidi Kurds. “ISIS arrests four Kurds in Mosul on spying charges,” Rudaw, April 2, 2015.

f The specter of the Ba'ath era is never far from the minds of the older generation of peshmerga officers. Soldiers along the Makhmour front described their positions being hit by mortars infused with what they believed to be suffocating chlorine gas in early April, evocative of the al-Anfal era the senior officers so bitterly recalled. The peshmerga believe the Islamic State has the capacity to develop additional chemical weapons in what has slowly become its enclave in Mosul and that it will launch further chemical attacks as its territory shrinks. Karzan Hawrami, “Peshmerga Official: IS Developing Chemical Weapons Inside Mosul,” Bas News, June 2, 2016.

g Having pushed aside the now former Syrian al-Qa`ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in swaths of Syria and the neo-Ba'athist Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi (JRTN) in Iraq, the Islamic State does not tolerate regional challengers it may have once collaborated with in its previous incarnation as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). From its absolutist standpoint, more Iraq-centric insurgent movements like JRTN are considered ‘nationalist’ in nature and therefore insufficiently Islamic. While JRTN may have aligned itself with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as it was then known during the Mosul takeover in a failed bout with pragmatism, such coordination could only be very short-lived. Any insurgents failing to swear fealty to al-Baghdadi had to leave Islamic State-controlled areas or be executed. Although its leadership is estimated to have experienced Ba'athist officers, al-Baghdadi's salafist hardliners in no way want to be associated with secular Ba'athist ideology or any form of localized nationalism, Arab or otherwise.

h The Islamic State's suppression of fellow insurgents has also created a distinct vulnerability for the group. It does not now appear to have a dependable network of fellow non-state actors with which it can make common cause in a territorial crisis.



A Peshmerga soldier carries a German G3 assault rifle provided to Iraqi Kurds to combat the Islamic State, moments before coming under sniper fire on August 8, 2016. (Derek Henry Flood)

synched up with a much slicker social media campaign than its opponents.¹⁸

The Islamic State appears to maintain an advantage in terms of munitions as well, as firepower is coupled with its ability to dispatch highly dedicated suicide attackers on a regular basis. The group lashes out with Dragonov rifles, truck-mounted DShk heavy machine guns, Katuysha rocket batteries, and mortars of various diameters. The peshmerga, who have far fewer of these same weapons, complain that they cannot match the Islamic State's firepower and have only achieved a military balance with the crucial support of Western airpower. Iraqi state forces, on the other hand, are better equipped but lack the communal identity of the Kurds and various militias.

Islamic State fighters have a constantly evolving matrix of tactics that they employ to keep their enemies off balance. No frontline is entirely static around Mosul. Militant explosives technicians attempt to penetrate Iraqi and peshmerga lines to lay potent IEDs under the cover of night and deploy a seemingly limitless cadre of suicide bombers.

Even in towns and villages where the group has been pushed out, they are highly adept at laying explosive booby traps while constantly changing their emplacement from doorways to ordinary kitchen appliances.

From security forces to returning internally displaced persons, the most mundane, traditionally secure interior worlds are riddled with makeshift bombs as part of the Islamic State's psychological warfare campaign in territory that it calculates it can no longer realistically hold.¹⁹ In depopulated areas where the Islamic State maintains territorial control through kinetic action, it keeps men behind to harass Iraqi army units and peshmerga patrols to deadly effect with intermittent sniper and mortar attacks.²⁰

The use of coalition air power has steadily increased, helping

curtail large-scale Islamic State ground advances and dictating the rhythm of fighting.ⁱ The time between providing GPS coordinates of enemy positions and the resultant airstrike has been streamlined to about 10 minutes.²¹ Meanwhile, the Islamic State takes advantage of periods of low cloud cover to strike Iraqi or peshmerga positions. In Islamic State-held towns ringing Mosul like Bashiqa in Ninewa Governorate, the group burns piles of tires in a bid to obscure the vantage of fighter jets and drones, which soar largely out of reach of shoulder-fired anti-aircraft weaponry.²²

Yet peshmerga members along the Makhmour front^j are concerned they are still at a disadvantage when it comes to weapons. They described being far outgunned by the Islamic State in the early days of the 2014 land grab after their opponents had access to four Iraqi divisions' worth of weapons and war materiel, including up

ⁱ The coalition airstrikes under the lead of the United States' Operation Inherent Resolve have set the rhythm of the fighting with regard to visibility. The Islamic State is least likely to move about during midday under hot, clear skies. Peshmerga fighters explained that the bulk of the fighting occurs between dusk and dawn and that during high sun the front is largely silent. Incoming sniper and mortar fire tends to begin right at sundown. Islamic State operatives are extremely wary of air attacks by the coalition that deplete their coveted stock of vehicles, which they stole from Iraqi state forces in 2014. The Islamic State may have an added battlefield advantage this fall and winter when overcast weather could help conceal some of their daytime movements from aerial surveillance.

^j Makhmour was briefly overrun by an Islamic State onslaught in August 2014 at the apogee of the group's military prowess and was pushed back by combination of coalition airstrikes and peshmerga ground forces. Despite the success two years ago, the town remains a veritable ghost town devastated by bombardment and scarcity. Author interviews, Makhmour, Iraq, August 1, 2016; Sheren Khalil and Matthew Vickery, "Battle for Makhmour: a frontline in Iraq's latest war," Middle East Eye, August 18, 2014.

to 450 Humvees.

Many Kurdish fighters carry Kalashnikovs dating to as far back as the Iran-Iraq war with a scant few makeshift, up-armored Humvees captured from the Islamic State in battle. Most are operating Chinese and Japanese pickup trucks and even ordinary sedans along IED-laden dirt tracks.²³

Another factor that has slowed progress is the tangled web of intermediate objectives that are being fought first. Each of these lesser-known geographic objective points comes with its own bundle of territorial, religious, and ethnic issues. The Iraqi army and the peshmerga have been going after geographical targets simultaneously but often from different angles, with command structures entirely independent of one another. These formations are also motivated by highly divergent political aims.

Progress advancing on Mosul has been slower than many would have hoped due to fierce resistance by the Islamic State in a number of key cities and towns. One roadblock has been Hawija,^k an Islamic State-controlled town to the west of hotly contested Kirkuk with its prize energy reserves. Hawija has been a principal center for Islamic State militants on the road linking the economic centers of Kirkuk to Mosul, and evicting Islamic State from there will free up forces to work up toward Mosul. Arab leaders in Kirkuk have called for the liberation of Hawija before Mosul.²⁴

Part 4: The Challenge Ahead

The discord and distrust among the Islamic State's opponents indicates that taking back Mosul and holding the city will be even more challenging than the current effort to reach the city's outskirts. If the Islamic State is to use the tactics of mining, tunneling, and fortifying within Mosul that it has utilized in far less significant towns in the Ninewa hinterlands, not only with the recapture of the urban realm be a bloody ordeal, but its rebuilding will likely be a perilous project if private homes in the city's warrens are littered with IEDs. Nor should one underestimate just how well the group knows Mosul as it was present in the area during the years of the Iraqi insurgency, operating in a nebulous underworld of criminality colored with violent salafism.

Senior peshmerga members believe it would be best to not fully encircle Islamic State fighters in Mosul and leave a narrow escape route. Then, as Iraqi Kurds and their allies inch toward the city's

limits on the village level, gradually tightening the noose, a de facto cordon for the Islamic State to retreat toward Syria's al-Hassakah or Deir ez-Zor Governorates could be created, as one commander outlined to the author. While in exodus toward the Syrian border, their convoys could then be struck from the air via peshmerga and coalition coordination.²⁵ This outcome could lessen civilian loss of life and destruction to Mosul, the argument goes.

From an on-the-ground perspective, Mosul looks to be a long way off. The Iraqi military and the peshmerga are not working in genuine synchronicity. The American contingent at Camp Swift in the midst of the Ninewa Operations Command appears to be literally in the middle of this strategic dysfunction between the mostly ethnic-Arab Iraqi army on one side and the peshmerga on the other.²⁶ What role the Hashd al-Watani or the feared Iranian-backed Hashd al-Shabi will have either in the fight or in the city after remains very unclear. There is a fear that once the Islamic State has left the city the Sunni and Shi'a Arab militias may set their sights on one another in a rivalrous power vacuum where Baghdad has little or no authority.

Anti-Islamic State troops and fighters entering Mosul may very well be facing a precarious ordeal. The city had a pre-occupation population of between 1.7-2 million. With generous estimates of possibly a 1.2-1.5 million civilians remaining,²⁷ avoiding catastrophic levels of death should be a key strategic aim. This should be based not only on humanitarian grounds but also to avoid creating a pool of disenfranchised Sunni Iraqis from which it could draw upon to replenish depleted ranks of its foot soldiers once it has been routed from its urban bastion.

The freeing of Mosul and what transpires in its aftermath will likely define events in Iraq for years to come. While the city is estimated to have had a sizeable Sunni Arab majority before its jihadist occupation, a future issue will be the right of return of heavily persecuted minorities who fled under Islamic State rule. There are many daunting questions as a much publicized but poorly outlined military operation looms ahead.¹

Can Mosul regain its former ethnic and religious diversity? Who precisely will liberate the city, and who will claim its liberation? Who should govern a post-Islamic State Mosul? And how can the Islamic State be prevented from waging an asymmetric insurgency in the area if it is pushed out of Mosul? **CTC**

^k Hawija was home to a Sunni protest camp incensed at what they considered to be the Shi'a chauvinism of the Maliki government. On April 23, 2013, Iraq's Defense Ministry launched a raid on the Hawija encampment, resulting in the deaths of some 44 people. Fourteen months later the town became a bastion of Islamic State rule in the Kirkuk Governorate. Sudad al-Sahly, "Iraq raid on Sunni protest sparks clashes, 44 killed," Reuters, April 23, 2013.

1 Peshmerga commanders believe that the time frame of late 2016 being mooted for the start of the Mosul operation in some quarters in Baghdad and Washington will end up giving the Islamic State an advantage in terms of poor aerial visibility, which in turn will make securing Mosul that much more grueling. Peshmerga leaders also believe that the regular public chatter about the city's recapture is giving the Islamic State an unnecessary window to recalculate its war fighting strategy and adapt to changes in the frontline environment.

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